THRILLING WESTERN

SEPT.

10¢

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

GUN CURE
A Novel of Killer's Trails
By LEE BOND

•

RED JUSTICE
A Novelette of Indian Fighting Days
By A. LESLIE

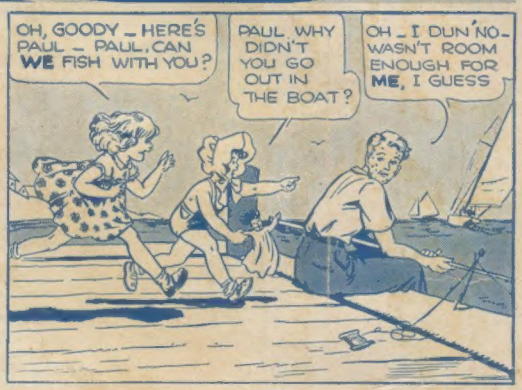
GUNS ROAR FOR TEXAS
The Glorious Story of a Hundred Years
By COLONEL JOHN J. BONIFACE

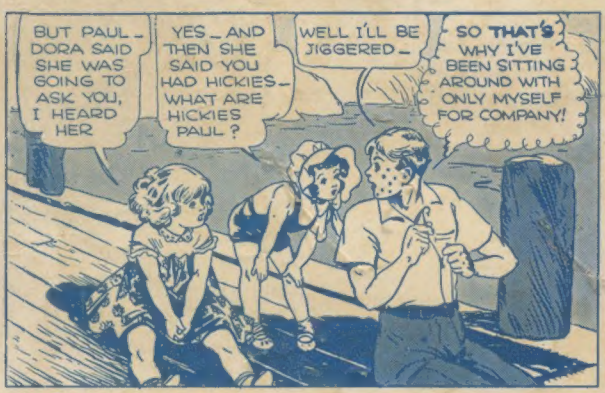
ALSO
J. ALLAN DUNN
•
SYL MacDOWELL

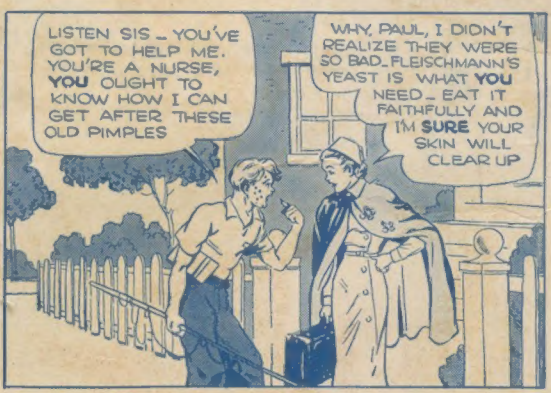
RICHARD LYON

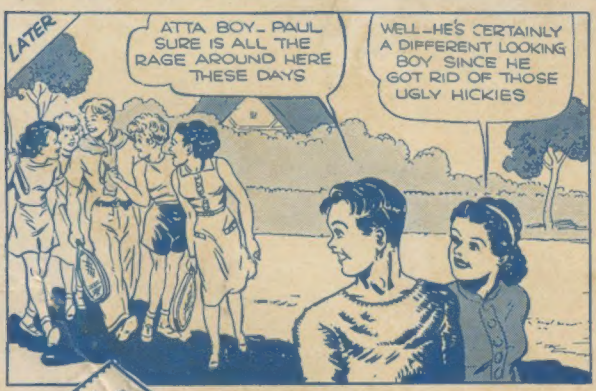
10¢ □ THRILLING WESTERN □ SEPT. 1936

THE GIRLS WERE GIVING PAUL THE "GO-BY" UNTIL—









—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

Don't let Adolescent Pimples put a stop to YOUR good times

YOUNG PEOPLE are often plagued by unsightly pimples after the start of adolescence—from about 13 to 25, or longer.

Important glands develop at this time, and final growth takes place causing disturbances in the body. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin —and pimples break out!

Fleischmann's fresh Yeast clears these skin irritants out of the blood. Then, the pimples go. Eat 3 cakes *daily* —one about ½ hour before meals —plain, or dissolved in a little water—until your skin clears. Start today!

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Why Trained Accountants Command High Salaries

—and how ambitious men are qualifying by the La Salle Problem Method

GET this straight.

By "accountancy" we do not mean "bookkeeping." For accountancy begins where bookkeeping leaves off.

The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes* and *interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

He knows what profits should be expected from a given enterprise, how they may be increased.

He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures wherewith he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to *use* these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—the one man business cannot do without.

Small wonder that he commands a salary five to ten times as great as that of the bookkeeper. Indeed, as an independent operator (head of his own accounting firm) he often earns as much as the president of the big and influential bank in his community, or the operating manager of a great railroad.

Some Examples

Small wonder that accountancy offers the trained man such fine opportunities—opportunities well illustrated by the success of thousands of LaSalle accountancy students.* For example—one man was a plumber, 32 years old, with only an eleventh grade education. Today he is auditor for a large bank and his income is 325 per cent larger.

Another was a drug clerk at $30 a week. Now he heads his own very successful accounting firm with an income many times as large.

A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of a great hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

A credit manager—earning $200 a month—moved up quickly to $3000, to $5000, and then to a highly profitable accounting business of his own which nets him better than $10,000 a year.

And What It Means to You

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you can equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable profession?

Are you really *determined* to get ahead? If so, you can start at once to acquire—by the LaSalle Problem Method—a thorough understanding of Higher Accountancy, master its fundamental principles, become expert in the practical application of those principles—this without losing an hour from work or a dollar of pay.

Preliminary knowledge of bookkeeping is unnecessary. You will be given whatever training, instruction or review on the subject of bookkeeping you may personally need—and without any extra expense to you.

If you are dissatisfied with your present equipment—if you recognize the opportunities that lie ahead of you through home-study training — you will do well to send at once for full particulars. The coupon will bring them to you without any obligation, also details of LaSalle's convenient payment plan.

Check, sign and mail the coupon NOW.

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Opportunities in Accountancy—Check below and we will send you a copy of "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays," also copy of "Ten Years' Promotion in One," all without obligation.

☐ Higher Accountancy:

Other LaSalle Opportunities: If more interested in one of the other fields of business indicated below, check here:

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- ☐ Modern Salesmanship
- ☐ Traffic Management
- ☐ Law: Degree of LL. B.
- ☐ Commercial Law
- ☐ Industrial Management
- ☐ Business Correspondence
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- ☐ Personnel Management
- ☐ Expert Bookkeeping
- ☐ C. P. A. Coaching
- ☐ Business English
- ☐ Stenotypy
- ☐ Effective Speaking
- ☐ Railway Accounting

Name .....

Present Position .....

Address .....

*Names available on request.

THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. X, No. 3 G. B. BARNUM, *Editor* September, 1936

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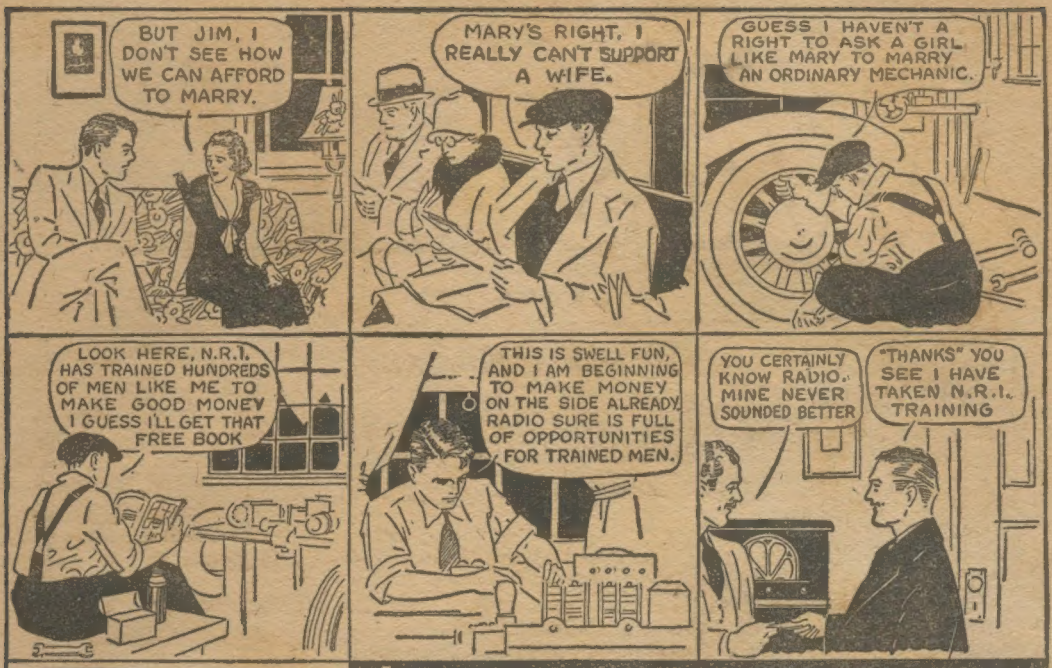

I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME
In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

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The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as $200 to $500 a year—full time servicing jobs pay as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts own their own full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio.

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Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send special equipment which gives you practical experience—shows you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important Radio principles.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning; tells about my Money Back Agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a post card—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6J09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

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"I now have my own Radio business which shows three hundred dollars a month profit—thanks again to National Radio." FRANK T. REESE, 39 N. Felton St., Philadelphia, Penna.

Earned $50 First Month in Spare Time

"I knew nothing about Radio. After four lessons I began servicing Radios, earning $50 the first month. Last winter I made as high as $100 a month in spare time."—G. F. WALTON, 808 West Olney Road, Norfolk, Va.

THIS FREE BOOK HAS HELPED HUNDREDS OF MEN MAKE MORE MONEY

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6J09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

The SWAP COUNTER

An Exchange Service for Readers

HERE'S where you can exchange something you have but don't want for something someone else has that you do want. This is a FREE service.

For example, if you have a camera and don't use it, and would like to have a stamp album, write: "Have Eastman camera No. 1, Jr., make, 3 years old, good condition, will exchange for stamp album with 3,000 stamps, 25 countries.—John Smith, 49 Park Street, Albany, N. Y."

Limit your request to 25 words. No goods for sale listed, nor requests concerning firearms or any illegal articles.

Type or hand-print clearly in submitting announcements. THRILLING WESTERN will not be responsible for losses sustained. Make very plain just what you have and what you want to "swap" it for. Enclose a clipping of this statement with your request.

Our first swapper has an unusual offer that is going to be popular! I have a beautiful pure white and also a green Java Specifer Peacock. I have peacock eggs in season, too—and a number of beautiful varieties of pheasants and swans to trade for your good condition binoculars or what have you? Paul J. Spencer, Gentry, Missouri.

Here's a small-town newspaper man who would like a post-card film pack camera in a good condition. Please write me your offers. Henry Parnell, New London, Ohio. (No. 18 Grant Str.)

Send me your typewriter or small electric radio, if in good condition, and I'll send you my guitar that is practically new and worth plenty of money. N. W. Carpenter, Jr., New Augusta, Mississippi.

Come along, boys, make money with one of my ten money-making plans; five magic tricks; or two old and valuable coins; all for three hundred mixed foreign stamps or what can you-all send me? Delbert St. Clair, New Castle, Va.

Here's a grand offer that'll appeal to all of you! Have a bunch of books that are both old and new that I'd like to swap for a small oil movie projector or something equally practical. W. K. Wade, Sebrall, Va.

If you had a list as large as mine, you wouldn't be able to list it all—so I'll just give you a few leaders—have typewriter that clicks along swell; all sorts of courses, including I.C.S.; and a million other things. Would like radio testing equipment, small gasoline motors; anything that will be usable. W. F. Weatherly, Menominee, Michigan—Route No. One.

All you cowboys seem to want match-book covers these days, so here's a swapper with lots of these covers to offer you; also view cards of many varieties and places; precancels, meters, postmarks from everywhere. Here you are fellahs, write to Charles Boyle, 19 Broad Street Place, Lynn, Massachusetts.

Stamp collectors Eden! Have Jubilees, airmails, commemoratives, all foreign stamps to exchange with foreign and local collectors; also earphones, radio books, taxidermy course, and would like covers, Zeppelin stamps. Robert Wendroff, 84 W. 25th Street, Bayonne, New Jersey.

Boys, step lively for this one! I'll photograph anything in, or around, Chicago on postcard size film in exchange for Mercury Vapor Sunlamp or send me something practical for my McFadden's Physical Culture Encyclopedia in five volumes that are like new. Joseph S. Dudek, 1813 Hervey Street, Chicago, Ill.

Be strong and strapping! If you want muscles that'll bulge out of your shirts, just take my offer of a genuine Charles Atlas Physical Culture Course that is in complete and perfect condition and send me punching bag, dumbbells, cornet, accordion or what can you offer? Clarence W. Pate, Samson, Alabama.

Like for like! Send me a view card of your city or vicinity and I'll send you one from Toledo. Make it snappy! Thelma Skiver, R.F.D. No. One, Box No. 516, Holland, Ohio.

And more of the above type offer—send me 100 different foreign postage stamps for the same amount from me, but different from the issues you send. W. C. Singleton, Bellwood, Pa.

She shall have music—and so shall he—If he trades his wrist watch or practical and valuable articles for my Grebe battery radio (Model MU-1) or my portable phonograph in good condition. Stanley J. Zuchora, 2748 Meade Street, Detroit, Michigan.

There's magic in them thar offers, padner! I have magic books, magic apparatus such as card reel, egg bag, forcing deck of cards and other things to trade for your radio analyzer, voltmeter, radio parts, and other articles. Sam Oliva, 1808 Blandina St., Utica, N. Y.

I'd sure like to trade my beautiful stuffed birds and animals for your set of oil colors! fishing plugs, good reel, large moths (mounted or unmounted) and information or books on nature study or what can you offer? Hartley Ohlsen, Box 536, Iron Mountain, Michigan.

You all like souvenirs from other parts of the country—so write to me and I'll send you two souvenirs from Washington—in return I'd like ten match covers from your city. Nels Peterson, Route Two, Box 500, Bremerton, Washington.

I'd like to have your gasoline motor for a model airplane and in exchange I'll send you 750 stamps from one hundred and forty two countries that include a one-dollar stamp album with scarcely-heard-of diamond shaped stamp. Jack Davis, 681 Woodford Ave., Hamilton, Ohio.

Trade my stamps from 27 different countries for other things offered. Send list to Bill Gill, 1424 So. Penna. Avenue, Wellston, Ohio.

Have Webster's International Dictionary, hundreds of albums and books, to trade for duplicator, motion picturescope, binoculars, photos to trade for photos. Carl Maness, Troy, North Carolina.

Want to swap matchbook covers with all except Washington collectors. Jim Anderson, 5816 Shattuck Avenue, Oakland, Calif.

Can offer typewriter, auto-harp, Wurlitzer violin, Waltham watch, Bosch magneto; would like five string banjo, binoculars, surveyors compass, watchmaker's lathe or best offer. John B. Adkins, Route No. 1, Branchland, W. Va.

Want small-all-wave radio or three or four tube Universal with plug-in coils; have tattooing outfit or anything else you'd like. H. Linna, 729 Snow St., Negaunee, Michigan.

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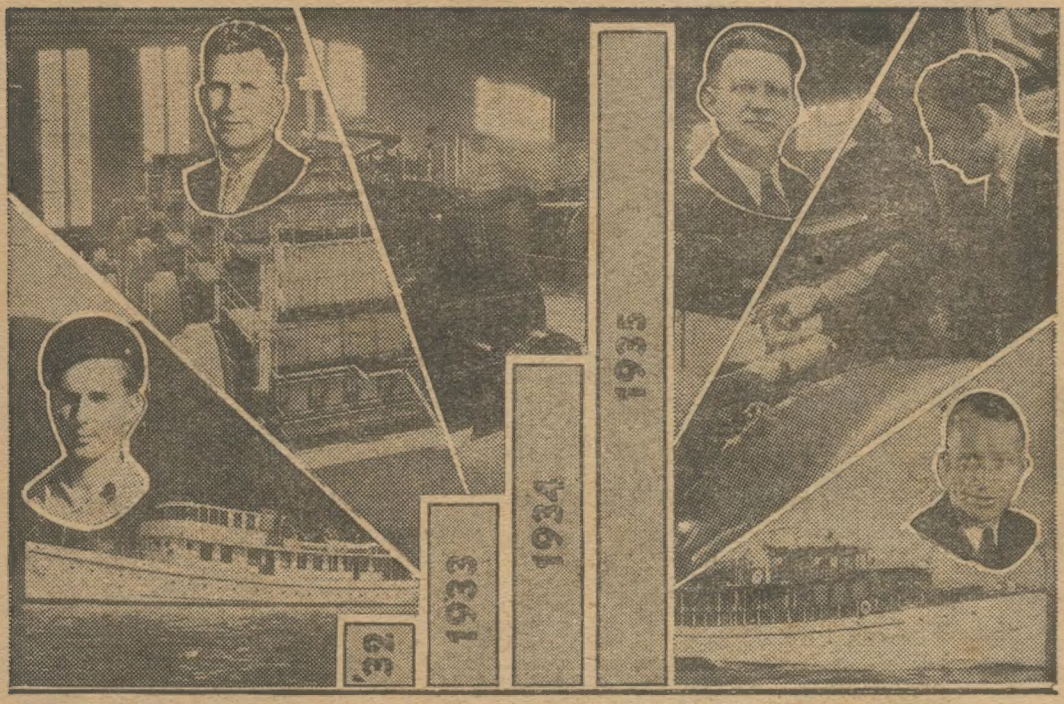

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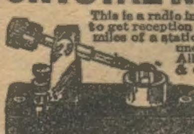

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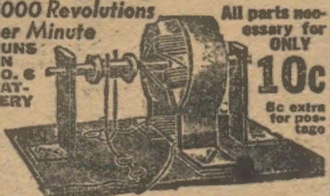

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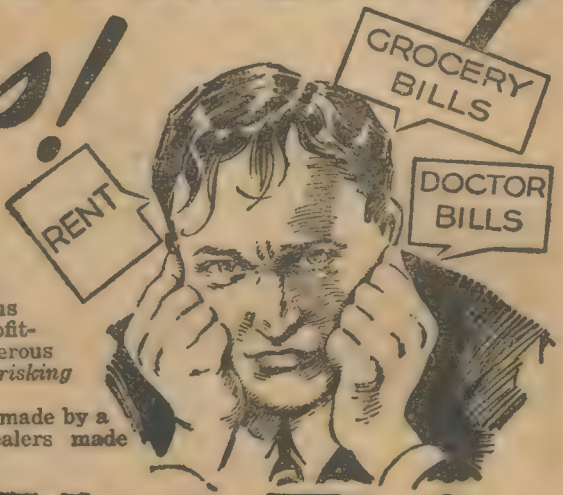

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GUN

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CHAPTER I

Killer's Play

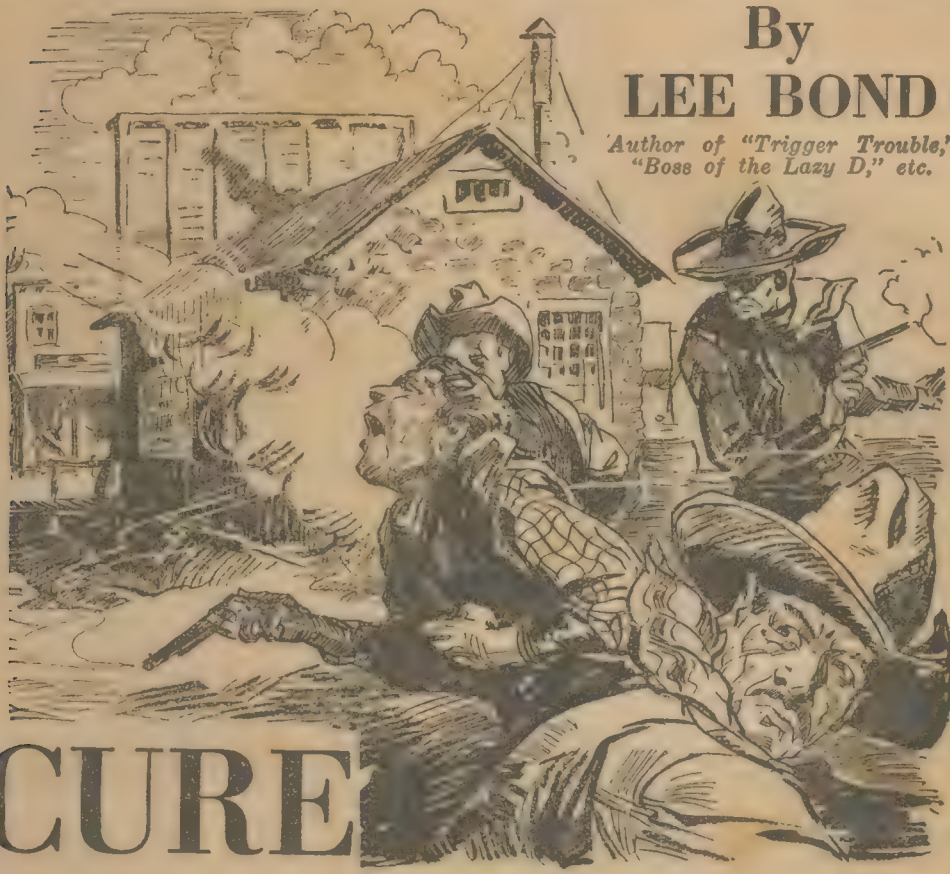
THE sun was not an hour high as three men rode unknowingly to a rendezvous with death.

Stubby, hot-headed old Frank Bercham came down the west branch of a trail that lay like a huge Y out there in the cedar-clad hills. Bercham was headed for the point where this branch of the trail joined the main stem which led out across the hills to Cedar City. He let his roan gelding cover the ground at a running walk, and kept his gnarled old right hand glued to the butt of the big six-gun which snuggled against his thigh.

There was fresh sign along the trail which told Frank Bercham that another herd of his Block B cattle had been driven off during the night. The old fellow cursed in a steady, grinding tone, for whoever had taken his cattle had added insult to injury by deliberately driving the stock down the main trail, where the signs would be more than easy to follow.

"Roy Taylor has went too far this time!" Bercham grated. "Damned if

Leslie Incites a Dangerous Range Feud!



By
LEE BOND
Author of "Trigger Trouble," "Boss of the Lazy D," etc.

CURE

I don't ride right through that pack uh gunnies he's hired, an' put a slug in his belly fer this stunt. I don't give a whoop if we was onct friends. He's killed his last Block B rider an' stole his last Block B steer. I'm drillin' that old hellion!"

So Frank Bercham rode down the trail, a gun half drawn from its worn holster, his mind set on triggering the man he had known since boyhood.

And down the east prong of the Y which led from their two big ranches to Cedar City came Roy Taylor. His lean old face was a little pale beneath its heavy tan, and there was a smoldering fire in his black eyes.

His horse traveled at a stiff lope, yet Taylor could see the signs left by a herd of his T Bar steers that had been stolen from a closely guarded pasture the night before. There was a dead cowboy back there at the pasture gate, and Taylor rode with a fighting rage in his heart.

Beside Taylor rode one of his cowboys — a rangy, thin-faced hombre with quick darting eyes and nervous hands, a gunman by every sign of the profession.

Tangles with a Horde of Cowland Coyotes!

"I'm callin' showdown with Frank Bercham, Flint," Taylor snarled without looking at the man beside him. "That old heller overplayed his hand when he jumped my herd an' killed Ed Bean last night!"

"From what I've heard since I signed on with yore outfit last month, this ain't the first time the Block B has killed T Bar men or stole T Bar beef," Flint growled. "Hell, Taylor, there's only one way to settle a deal like this!"

Flint patted the twin butts of his low slung guns suggestively. There was a queer light in his cold eyes as he talked, and his hard mouth twisted to hide a sneering, malicious grin.

BUT lanky old Roy Taylor was going on down the trail with his own bitter thoughts. He charged suddenly past the nose of the tall ridge that lifted in the center of the Y. An oath ripped tensely from his throat as his lean left hand jerked back on the bridle reins. There before him was Frank Bercham, rearing his own big bronc in a sharp halt.

"So!" Bercham yelled as his horse settled down. "Backtrackin' to bushwhack whoever followed yuh, huh?"

"Backtrackin', hell!" Roy Taylor snarled in answer. "Yuh murderin' old buzzard, which one o' yore mangy outfit killed Ed Bean last night when yuh stole my steers?"

"Stole *yore* steers?" Bercham almost shouted the words. "Yuh've got a hell of a nerve, Taylor, to try toverin' up yore dirty doin's by stallin' like yuh are. Draw, damn yuh!"

These two grizzled cattle kings had met more than once in the five years they had been at loggerheads with each other. Their meetings had invariably been explosive affairs. But so far they had done nothing worse than curse and threaten.

Had they been alone, their encounter in all likelihood would have had no more serious outcome than the others. But this time Sam Flint, the cold-eyed, gun-swift renegade who had been hired by Buck Leslie, Taylor's nephew, was along.

Buck Leslie did the hiring and firing at the T Bar, and Roy Taylor had protested on numerous occasions at having such rannies as Sam Flint on the payroll. But the gunman had been kept on. Now a crafty look glittered in his eyes as he edged his skittish bronc away from Taylor.

"I ain't in the habit o' takin' advantage o' the snakes I stomp," Taylor was snarling. "I'll let yuh get yore iron out, yuh thievin' old buzzard, afore I draw an' put a bullet in yore belly!"

"Crawlin', huh?" Bercham stormed. "Yuh ain't got the nerve to draw, that's what! You an' yore damn skunk outfit—"

"Look out, boss!" Sam Flint yelled shrilly. "That old son is—"

Flint's words were drowned in the double thunder of his own gun. He spurred his horse, jumping the animal out of the cloud of powder smoke.

Old Frank Bercham was reeling drunkenly, a scared, sick look on his face. The old fellow caught his saddle horn, turned dazed, dull eyes on Roy Taylor. There were two ominous red stains on Bercham's shirt front. In the center of each stain was a drilled hole—the size of a .45 slug.

Bercham opened his ashen lips slowly. Blood drooled from his mouth, trickled down his chin. "Hell, Roy, I never thought yuh'd hire a damned snake to drill me," he muttered. "We come up the trail from Texas when we was no more than kids. Like brothers, we was. An' now— *Watch out,* Roy! That snake—"

Bercham had been sagging slowly as he talked. Suddenly his glazing eyes flamed. The old fellow's short gnarled body whipped up, and his right hand streaked lightning-fast for his holster. From the level of his hip lanced pale flame as his stubby thumb flicked back and let fall the hammer of his gun.

In the same instant there came

the blasting report of a gun from behind Roy Taylor. Taylor felt the gnawing pain of a bullet tearing slantwise across his shoulder blades. The impact hurled him forward, jammed him down hard against the saddle horn. His mount plunged and snorted, and the rugged hills did a crazy dance before his eyes.

But he managed to stick on the bronc. His eyes stared at the wilting form of his onetime friend. Flint was writhing in agony.

"Frank!" Taylor heard his own voice rasping. "Steady, pard! I'll give yuh a hand in a minute. Set tight, Frank."

"It don't pay—to trust—hired killers, Roy," Frank Bercham gasped. "That hellion—aimed to drill yuh—through the back. I got—the dirty son—"

Bercham fell then. He hit the ground limply, shuddered once, and rolled half-over.

Roy Taylor heard a piercing, nerve-jarring scream, and twisted dazedly, tearing his eyes from the

dead cattle king. Yonder lay Sam Flint, clawing savagely at his middle with hooked, stiff fingers that were already stained crimson.

The wound across Roy Taylor's shoulders burned like fire, and he noticed for the first time that his left arm hung limp and useless at his side. But he swung down from the saddle, steadied himself against his horse, and calmly drew his battered old peacemaker.

"By God, Flint, yuh murdered Frank Bercham!" Taylor's hoarse voice crackled out. "Quit screamin' like a banshee, you yella-hearted son! Look at me, Flint. Look, damn yuh! I want this slug to land plumb between yore eyes!"

CHAPTER II

Tom Bercham Is Tricked

SOMETHING stopped Roy Taylor's lean old finger from tripping the trigger of his six-gun. Perhaps it was Sam Flint screaming his name. Perhaps Taylor could not shoot a man who was already dying.

"I can't do it, Flint!" he choked out. "God knows yuh need it. But I can't."

He lowered the gun, shoved it into his holster with a trembling hand. He looked back over his shoulder at Bercham, studying the dead, white face for a long moment. When Taylor again faced around there were tears coursing down his seamed cheeks. He cursed thickly, lurched forward to stand over Sam Flint.

Flint's thin face was an ashen, twitching death mask from which two stricken eyes stared in horror. The gunman's slitted mouth was writhing, flecked at the corners with foam. Sam Flint was dying and he knew it.

"Do somethin', Taylor!" he begged. "Don't stand there lookin' at me like that, man. Take—take my boots off, will yuh?"

"I'd rather lift yore damned scalp while yuh kin still feel!" Roy Taylor husked. "You killed the best friend I ever had, Flint!" He lifted his uninjured right hand, swiped almost savagely at his wet cheeks and eyes. "If I had me a handful o' salt I'd pour it in that hole Frank's slug made in yore belly," he snarled at the stricken killer.

"Don't!" Sam Flint cried. "Yuh're worse than a devil, Taylor, to stand there talkin' like that! I'm dyin', man!"

"Which is very lucky fer you," the T Bar owner rasped stiffly. "Yuh killed Frank without cause, Flint. An' he—saved my life—after that—"

For a moment the lean old fellow stood there, swaying a little unsteadily. Blood dripped from the fingers of his useless left hand. Dull,

nerve-killing pain gnawed at his back, and he thought he would gag. But his eyes, hot and dry now, stayed glued to the twitching face of the dying Flint.

Some of the shock of seeing Bercham killed before his very eyes was passing now, and thoughts began groping through his mind slowly. "Why did yuh make this sorta play, Flint?" he demanded suddenly. "Yuh aimed to kill me an' Frank Bercham both. Why?"

"I seen yuh put a pint o' whiskey in yore saddle pocket when we started out from the ranch," Sam Flint groaned. "Give me some o' that whiskey, Taylor. If yuh'll give me that whiskey an' take my boots off I'll talk—I'll talk—"

Roy Taylor reeled away. He got the pint flask from the saddle pocket, walked back to where Sam Flint lay, and squatted on his heels. He had to grip the bottle between his knees since he had but one hand to use. It took him a long time to gouge the cork from the flask with the blade of his knife. When the task was done he tilted the bottle to his lips, drank thirstily, then wiped the neck of the bottle on his shirt front.

"I oughtn't t' make dyin' any easier fer yuh, Flint," he said grimly.

Tom Bercham

"But I've got to know why yuh made this play like yuh did. Here, drink this while I git yore boots off."

Sam Flint drank that raw whiskey as if it were cold water. Some of the pallor left his sharp features, and his eyes became almost bright again. With the alcohol to deaden his nerves against the pain of that ragged abdominal wound, he lived almost an hour. And Sam Flint talked until the cold fingers of death gripped his heart.

Old Roy Taylor sat there listening, never interrupting, never taking his eyes from the face of the dying killer. Taylor's face became pale as he heard Flint's story, and his lean right hand clenched and unclenched above the butt of his gun as his brain groped back into the past to solve many things that had been riddles these past five years.

Oaths fell in bitter muttering from his lips now as he gazed down into Sam Flint's dead face. "Double-crossed!" Roy Taylor gasped. "Frank an' me have been doublecrossed! An' now Frank is—gone—"

HE tried to get to his feet, but found that his head was dizzy and that his legs were numb and weak. He cursed his weakness, cursed the stabbing pains his movements brought to the wound across his shoulders.

He was still trying to get his legs under him when the beat of hoofs came echoing down the west fork of the trail. Now a horse and rider galloped around the nose of the tall ridge. The lean young rider brought his big tough sorrel to a rearing halt and sat there for a split-second, staring in wide-eyed amazement. Then the youth was out of the saddle, running toward old Frank Bercham.

"Uncle Frank!" The words were wrenched from the youth's throat as he dropped to his knees beside the dead man.

"He—he's dead, Tom," Roy Taylor called hoarsely.

Tom Bercham straightened slowly,

a dazed, numbing grief mirrored deep in his blue eyes as he turned to Roy Taylor.

"God, Roy—it's happened at last!" The youth's voice was choked, weak-sounding. "You an' Uncle Frank—No, Roy. You—*you* didn't do this, did you?"

Roy Taylor flinched as if a whip had fallen across his flesh.

"No, son, I—didn't do it," Taylor husked. "It was this thing here." He jerked a hand at the lifeless body of Sam Flint without taking his eyes from the grey and twitching face of Tom Bercham.

Tom was coming toward him now, batwing chaps flapping softly, dazed eyes unwinking. Tom's lean, long-fingered hands were at his thighs, caressing the cedar butts of low-slug six-guns. But his hands came away from those guns as he stood above Taylor.

Tom looked slowly at Sam Flint's lifeless face, then shook his head as if he could not understand. He removed his big grey Stetson, stood running those lean fingers slowly through a shock of thick red hair. His lips moved, yet no words passed them.

He knelt slowly, staring at Taylor out of eyes that were dull now from grief and shock. "I—I knew it would come sometime, Roy," he said softly. "You an' Uncle Frank were—like brothers once."

Roy Taylor flinched, made a choking noise in his dry throat. He was remembering that Frank Bercham had said something like that before death stilled his lips.

"Son, I—I didn't do it," Taylor pleaded. "Sniff my gun. Yuh'll see it ain't been fired."

"What happened?" Tom Bercham asked slowly.

Roy Taylor leaned back on one elbow. He told of the raid on his cattle the night before, and of finding one of his cowboys dead. In recounting what had happened here at the forks, the tale cut like a knife at Roy Taylor's heart. But he told the story accurately, leaving out no details and adding none.

Sheriff Cal Jerome

He clamped his grim old lips tightly when the story Sam Flint had told him came to mind. Out of troubled eyes he studied the lean, strong face of Tom Bercham. If he told what he now knew about the trouble between his own vast T Bar and the equally large Block B, this grim-faced youth before him would be hammering down the gun trail to call a smoky showdown with a man who unquestionably needed killing.

NO, Roy Taylor decided grimly, there was another way to handle this thing. Maybe he could undo part of the wrong that had been done if he acted in time. That thought jarred him to full attention.

"Help me up, Tom, an' prod me onto my hoss," Taylor gritted. "I've got to git into town. This shoulder has to be looked at. Or do yuh—blame me fer what's happened?"

"No," Tom Bercham said dazedly. "No, Roy, I don't blame you any more than I blamed Uncle Frank for the scrappin' you two have done. Sure, I'll help you up onto your horse."

Tom stepped forward as he spoke, his face weary and drawn. He stooped, hands reaching for Taylor's shoulders. He saw the wounded man lurch suddenly upward, and caught the glint of a big blue Colt that was

whipping toward his lowered head. But before he could fully comprehend, the barrel of the Colt crashed solidly along his jaw and temple.

Tom tried to speak, tried to focus his eyes through the weird splash of vari-colored lights that were blinding him. But only a groan passed his lips as he toppled slowly forward to sprawl in the trail dust.

CHAPTER III

Bad News

COLD water sluicing over his face and throat jerked Tom Bercham back to consciousness. He sat up, gasping a little as the icy liquid washed down the open neck of his shirt. "Hey, what's the idea?" he half snarled, rubbing his still dazed eyes.

Bercham blinked rapidly, twisting his head slowly as he saw the blur of faces about him. He groaned a little as his head moved, and lifted one hand to find a knot the size of an egg behind his left ear.

He remembered then how old Roy Taylor had batted him down with a gun, and anger brought a flush to his wet face. "Damn it, Roy, what was the idea?" he gritted. "I was tryin' to help yuh up like yuh asked me to when— Well, I'll be danged!"

The water cleared from his eyes, and Tom could now see clearly. And the first thing he saw was the seamed, leather-colored face of Sheriff Cal Jerome.

The gnarled old sheriff was standing almost over him, a big tin dipper in one hand, lips set grimly beneath his ragged white mustache. The sheriff's hard, cold grey eyes were boring into Tom Bercham's with an intensity that brought the young puncher to his feet with a lurch. His head throbbed, and for a moment white-hot lights bothered his vision. But the pain passed swiftly under the stimulus of curiosity, and Tom gasped at what he saw.

He was, he discovered to his amazement, in a narrow, iron-barred cell with the sheriff between him and the grilled door that stood ajar. Beyond the door, out in a narrow hallway that was flanked by many grim little cells, stood a dozen or more tight-lipped, hard-eyed men.

"Say, what in blazes does this mean, Sheriff?" Tom barked sharply. "How come I'm in the hoosegow?"

"I wonder!" the sheriff sneered hotly, and sidled out through the door in a quick movement that left Tom alone in the little cell. The heavy door banged, and a massive lock clicked.

Tom rocked to the cell door on high boot heels, eyes blazing angrily as he peered out at the men in the hallway. One of them stepped forward now to stand beside the sheriff, and Tom Bercham cursed thickly under his breath.

"Talk up, damn yuh!" the man snarled at him. "What happened out there at the forks o' the trail?"

The fellow was Buck Leslie, old Roy Taylor's nephew. Leslie was a paunchy young fellow, with baggy jowls, coarse, thick lips and a pair of pale little eyes that glinted coldly from behind rolls of loose fat. But despite his soft appearance, Buck Leslie was one of the best cattlemen in the country, and had proven himself more than handy with the brace of six-guns he carried on him.

Buck Leslie had made few friends since coming to his uncle's ranch five years ago. He was a top hand on the range and a dangerous man to cross. The only man, in fact, who had ever bested him in the five years he had rodded his uncle's spread was Tom Bercham.

"You shot off your mouth at me once before, Buck," Tom said now. "That was shortly after you lit in this country, five years ago. Remember?" Someone in the hallway snickered. Buck Leslie's face went crimson at the memory of that disastrous encounter.

It had happened in the Silver Cask Saloon. Tom Bercham had grinned that night when Buck Leslie had

called him a fighting name over a trivial matter. And, grinning, he had beaten Leslie to a bloody, slobbering pulp that had crawled and whined on the sawdust-covered floor.

"Tom Bercham, I'll blast yuh yet," Buck Leslie ripped out. "One o' these day I'll put a slug—"

He caught himself, eyes shuttling a sideward glance at the sheriff. The old officer was frowning, but seemed not to have heard. "Be seein' yuh, skunk!" Buck Leslie snarled at Bercham. "Directly I see how my uncle is comin' along, I'll be back here. Prod the truth out o' him, Sheriff. Or let me in that cell when I get back an' I'll do the proddin' myself," he boasted.

Leslie nodded his head at the men along the wall, and all but two slogged out after him.

"Well?" he demanded of the sheriff, after a moment.

"Yuh ready to do any talkin'?" the officer gruffed.

"Why am I in here, Jerome?" Tom jerked out. "Damn it, this thing don't make sense!"

"Yuh're here because Roy Taylor come packin' yuh in, hogtied acrost yore saddle," the old officer rasped. "Taylor says t' treat yuh to a cell, an' hints broad that there's murder on yore hands. Then he caves in, an' we have to pack him over to Doc Sawyer's office. Taylor has got a busted shoulder, where a bullet ripped into him. Know anything about it?"

"Mebbe." Tom shrugged, his mind racing. "Taylor say anything else?"

"Somethin' about Frank Bercham an' a dead T Bar man bein' out at the forks o' the trail," the sheriff replied more civilly. "Tom, I don't savvy this play none a-tall. Taylor hints that yuh're behind yore uncle's death as well as the death o' that T Bar man."

Tom Bercham felt suddenly weak. He clung to the cell door, staring almost wildly at the sheriff. "Roy Taylor accusin' *me* of killin' my own uncle?" he gasped.

"No, can't say that he *accused* yuh. Not outright, nohow," the sheriff grumbled. "But he says t' hold yuh, an' when I try to make him say why, he starts talkin' in circles, hintin' that yuh killed yore uncle an' that Sam Flint hombre without actually sayin' yuh done so. Hell, boy, what's up?"

"Wish I knew," Tom Bercham grated bitterly. "I—" He broke off abruptly, for there came the slam of a door toward the front of the building. Now a bellow of anger roared down the narrow corridor, and hard on the heels of the outburst ran a squat, grizzled cowboy, big fist clamped to the butt of a holstered gun.

FROM under the brim of a floppy black Stetson the man's brown eyes glared angrily, and a snarl twisted his lips back from tobacco-stained teeth. Bat Upton, Block B ramrod, was gunning for trouble, and his wrath seemed directed at the lank old sheriff.

"What in hell's goin' on around here?" Upton roared as he ploughed to a halt. "Yuh old hellion, I heard that— By glory, yuh *have* got Tom locked in a cell!"

"Uh-huh, I have," the sheriff said dryly. "An' listen, Bat. Last time yuh lit in to callin' me names I locked yuh right in that same cell until yuh'd slept it off. Yuh drunk again?"

"Drunk?" the Block B foreman snarled. "Yuh old billy goat, I'll—"

"Bat!" Tom Bercham's command cracked out. "Cut it out! What's into you, anyhow?"

Bat jerked his glance from the coolly unconcerned sheriff to stare a long moment at Tom's pinched, careworn face.

"I—I heard, Tom," Bat Upton muttered. "I rode a good hoss down gittin' here, boy. But damned if I'll ever believe it!"

"Believe what, Bat?" Tom asked quietly.

"Believe that yuh killed Frank Bercham!" the grizzled cowboy exclaimed. "This whole town is buzzin' with it. But whoever says yuh killed the man that raised yuh is a

blasted liar!" He glowered at the sheriff.

The officer said calmly: "I think it's a lie, too. Leastwise, I would think so if anybody was to say that Tom killed his own kin."

"Then what have yuh got him locked up fer?" Bat Upton demanded belligerently. "Yuh tryin' to pull the wool over my eyes, Cal Jerome?"

"No-o-o," the sheriff drawled slowly. "Bat, I'm gonna dump yuh in a cell if yuh don't watch that tongue o' yore'n. Who was doin' the talkin' in town about Tom bein' in here charged with murderin' his own uncle?"

"Them damned T Bar gun-slicks was doin' the talkin', that's who," Bat Upton rasped. "Their bronc stomper, Jake Purdy, didn't see me when I stepped into the Silver Cask to wet my throat after a hard ride. The big son kept bellerin' out loud how a gent that'd kill his own kin ought to be strung up."

"Yeah!" Upton grinned mirthlessly at him. "But Jake will keep his mouth shut from now on. I left him draped acrost the bar, with two teeth missin', one eye shut an' a knot in his neck!"

"Which don't buy yuh nothin'." The sheriff's voice was still sharper, and the frown had deepened between his keen old eyes. "You Block B an' T Bar gents have been raisin' hell for five years now, an' I've seen somethin' like this comin' for a long time."

"Like what?" Bat Upton demanded.

"Like the death o' Frank Bercham, one o' the finest men that ever lived," the old sheriff snapped. "An' from the looks o' that wound in Roy Taylor's withers, I'd say he had about as much chance as a snowball in hell."

"You mean that, Sheriff?" Tom Bercham asked. "You mean that Roy Taylor is liable to cash in, too?"

"His left shoulder blade is busted all to splinters." The old officer almost snarled the words. "He bled too much, an' Doc Sawyer says mebbe some o' the blood got inside."

"What a mess," Tom Bercham brooded. "Uncle Frank an' Roy Taylor—like brothers until this fool scrappin' started."

Before either the sheriff or Bat Upton could speak a man came running down the corridor.

"Hey, Sheriff!" the newcomer yelled breathlessly. "Doc Sawyer sent me after you. Roy Taylor is cashin' his chips, an' wants to talk to you afore he dies."

CHAPTER IV

Gun Trap

TOM BERCHAM paced the tiny cell floor for more than three hours. He yelled loudly from time to time, and kicked on the door until the whole building seemed to shake. But Tom was the only prisoner in the place and there seemed to be no one in the sheriff's office, which was a dingy little room at the front of the building.

At last Bercham gave up hope of attracting attention, and stood looking out through the one small window in the cell. Through the grim iron bars he could look out upon the confusion of log and frame buildings that was Cedar City.

He could see most of the main street, where saddled ponies stood at sagging hitching racks. There were buggies, buckboards and wagons clustered under a grove of cottonwood trees that grew about the public well, which was near the jail.

Tom saw men thronging along the hard packed dirt sidewalks, and observed that they moved about with an air of excitement. Once a knot of the milling men formed before the wide front of the Silver Cask Saloon, and Tom saw one jasper waving excitedly toward the jail.

The crowd poured in through the saloon's swing doors and Tom recognized two men. An angry frown wrinkled his forehead.

"That was Buck Leslie doin' the oratin' to the others," Tom mused

grimly. "An' I saw Jake Purdy there beside him."

Since Bat Upton had said something about the T Bar men doing a lot of talking in town, Tom felt pretty certain that he knew why that knot of men had stood there listening to Buck Leslie.

But his mind was busy with other problems. Why didn't the sheriff or someone else come back? Had old Roy Taylor died? "An' where in blazes did Bat go to?" Tom finished his thinking aloud. "If somebody don't come an' let me know how things stand I'll bust this danged coop down an' hide the pieces!"

It seemed to the caged youth that he had been waiting many hours when he heard the slow tromping of boots out in the narrow corridor. He turned expectantly, thinking the sheriff had returned at last. Instead he saw Buck Leslie leering at him through the bars.

TOM BERCHAM slid forward, a snarl of rage in his throat. Leslie stood there, a leering, sinister grin on his bloated lips. Leslie's face was flushed from drink, and there were ugly lights in his unnaturally bright eyes.

"Well, jailbird, how do yuh like the way things have gone?" Buck Leslie sneered. "Ain't quite so cocky now, are yuh?"

As he talked he dangled before Tom's puckered eyes a huge key ring—the jail keys. Tom bit back the scorching reply that came to his lips. He waited a full minute before speaking, getting his temper well under control.

"Tongue-tied, are yuh?" Buck Leslie snickered. "Hell, yuh ain't the first gent that got yaller up his back when he found hisself in jail!"

"Jail ain't such a comfortable place at that." Tom forced his voice to sound a little hoarse, as if he actually were frightened. "But I can't figger out why I'm here, Buck. Do you know?"

Leslie laughed until his big paunch shook. "Yuh're here for murder, Bercham," he said with evident relish. "The old man—my uncle—kicked the bucket a few minutes ago."

"No!" Tom Bercham choked out through stiff lips.

"Uh-huh, he shore did." Buck Leslie was grinning evilly now. "An' Bercham, I'd hate to be in yore fix."

"How so?" It was all Tom could do to make his voice sound puzzled instead of angry. "I'm mighty sorry that Roy Taylor died, Leslie."

"Why did yuh drill him from behind?" Buck Leslie sneered.

Tom gripped the iron door until his knuckles showed white. His eyes held in a burning glare to the pale orbs of Buck Leslie. And what Tom Bercham read in those merciless eyes was far from reassuring.

"I didn't shoot your uncle," Tom ripped out harshly. "Damn it, why do you say that?"

"Uncle Roy claimed yuh shot him," Buck Leslie answered hoarsely. "Bercham, yuh're in one hell of a fix. Know what this whole range is thinking about?" He thrust his fleshy face forward.

"This whole country thinks yuh killed yore own uncle, then shot Sam Flint an' my uncle when they rode up on yuh." Buck Leslie's voice came to Tom maliciously. "I've tried to talk sense to the men here in town, but they won't listen. They aim to lynch yuh, Tom Bercham!"

"You greasy hellion, I savvy your play!" Tom roared. "If I was out of here about two minutes—"

"Yuh better keep a civil tongue in that head o' yore'n, Tom Bercham," Buck Leslie snarled, stepping suddenly away from the barred door. "I—I come here to do yuh a favor, yuh fool."

"*You* do me a favor?" Tom rasped.

"Shore, Tom, I come to help yuh out o' this mess!" Buck Leslie's hoarse voice became almost wheedling as he advanced toward the barred door once more. "I know it seems funny fer me to give yuh a hand," he went on hurriedly, "but I hate to see any man strung up by a crazy mob. If yuh'll do what I

say, Bercham, I'll drop these keys where yuh can reach 'em."

Tom's face was tense now. "Just what do you want me to do?" He forced the words through his teeth.

"Hightail!" Buck Leslie hissed. "I'll drop these keys, then drift back down the street. But yuh've got to promise to wait at least an hour afore yuh make a break, so's I'll not be suspicioned. An' yuh've also got to promise to quit this country fast as a hoss can take yuh."

"Why?" Tom asked hoarsely. But he knew the answer—saw through Buck Leslie's dirty game. "Why do you want me to quit the country, Buck?" Tom repeated, voice a little steadier. "I ain't done nothin'."

"Yuh try tellin' that to a crazy mob," Leslie snarled. "An' get this, yuh fool. I can't hang around here no longer. Will yuh do what I say, or will yuh stay here an' wait for that mob?"

"With a good hoss under me I could be out of Arizona Territory an' acrost the line into Sonora in two days," Tom said slowly. "Drop your keys, Buck. I don't crave to tangle with a mob."

Tom was tensely alert, praying that Buck Leslie wouldn't notice that he hadn't made a direct promise. Tom had banked on Buck Leslie's evil elation blinding him to that fact.

And Tom won. Buck Leslie's heavy features worked into a mean grin. Coldly murderous lights flared in his pale little eyes as he opened his fingers slowly, letting the big key ring drop to the cement floor of the corridor. The keys made a jangling clatter in the silence, then Buck Leslie was backing away.

"Remember," Leslie called, "give me an hour before yuh let yoreself out o' this coop. Then head straight south fast as yuh kin ride."

"An hour is a long time in a case like this," Tom protested. "What if the sheriff comes back an' misses his keys?"

"That blasted sheriff has been took out on a wild goose chase by some o' my men," Buck Leslie growled. "Yuh do what I say, d' yuh hear?"

"Shore, I hear," Tom Bercham said softly as Buck Leslie faded from sight down the corridor. "I also smell skunk, Buck. If I was to bust down that south trail I'll bet I'd ram right into a whole pack of T Bar jaspers with itchy trigger fingers. Yuh're slick, Buck, but not slick enough—I hope!"

Tom squatted on his heels, reached a long arm through the bars, and lifted the key ring from the floor. Less than a minute later he stepped through his cell door and out into the narrow corridor, tensely alert as he stood there listening.

"Folks will be eatin' dinner at this time o' day, so I'll likely not be spotted when I leave this jail house," Tom mused grimly. "Long as I keep off that southbound trail I'll likely have little trouble makin' a getaway."

But in that Tom was badly mistaken. For at that very moment Buck Leslie was deploying a band of slit-eyed hombres about the jail—men who had orders to kill Tom Bercham the moment he stepped from the building.

"He'll come out the back, aimin' to head for the corral yonder where that sorrel stud o' his is pegged." Buck Leslie grinned at his hirelings. "Frog, you an' Soapy go to the front o' the buildin', jest in case. Rest o' yuh get under that brush yonder by the sheriff's corral. When Tom Bercham gets halfway to the corral, open up on him. An' keep shootin' ontil yuh *know* he's dead!"

CHAPTER V

Thirsty Guards

PERHAPS it was some subtle sixth sense that warned Tom Bercham that death hovered near. Or perhaps it was the fact that he knew Buck Leslie for what he was. Tom had known for more than two years now that Buck Leslie and the T Bar men were stealing and selling old Roy Taylor's T Bar beeves. Tom also

knew that Leslie and his hand-picked gang of cutthroats had stolen Block B cattle and driven them down the trail to the border country.

Tom had kept such things strictly to himself, hoping some day to catch Buck and his gang red-handed. There had been too much trouble between the outfits, and Tom had kept silent for fear of fanning the smoldering hate of Frank Bercham and Roy Taylor into a dangerous blaze.

"But Uncle Frank an' Roy Taylor are gone now," Tom muttered through grim lips. "Best thing I can do is try to get the skunk that caused their deaths. Buck Leslie is my meat—if he don't collect me first." His instinct counseled caution.

HE moved down the narrow hall now, treading lightly. He peered into the stuffy little compartment that was the sheriff's office, noted with satisfaction that the front door was closed. He went into the little room, eyes flashing quickly over the walls and the battered desk.

He saw his own crisscrossed shell belts coiled there on a corner of the desk, and stepped toward them. He found his big .45s in a drawer of the sheriff's desk, inspected them briefly, then slid them into the holsters which were snuggled against his thighs.

He kept shooting uneasy glances toward the front door, unable to rid himself of the feeling that there was danger lurking uncomfortably close. He took his grey Stetson from a peg on the wall, drew it on carefully over his head.

He had to cock the hat jauntily to one side because it hurt the sore spot on his head where Roy Taylor's gun barrel had smacked him. He cursed the soreness, but settled his hat firmly sideward.

He turned then and went swiftly back into the narrow runway that led between the double rows of grim iron cages that were the jail's cells. He thought of the sheriff's corral out back, where, he reasoned, his sorrel stallion would have been penned with the sheriff's horses.

As he drew near that back door he felt a strange tightening of his nerves, and caught himself reaching suddenly for the cedar-butted six-guns that rested so comfortably against his thighs. He slowed his pace, finally halting at the narrow door which opened out into the jail's backyard.

He reached for the white knob of the flimsy door, but did not open the portal just then. Blue eyes puckered, he stood there listening, head cocked to one side. He heard nothing, and tightened his grip on the doorknob. But again he hesitated, at the same time cursing himself for being a fool.

"Leslie wanted me to wait an hour, which would give him time to gather his hired killers an' hide along the south trail," Tom rasped. "I'm actin' boogerly as a toad in a hail storm."

On sudden impulse he pulled the big iron key from the door's lock, stooped, and applied an eye to the keyhole. His view was necessarily limited, and he could see little except the brush-fringed corral fifty yards away. But that much of a view proved sufficient to wrench a startled oath from Tom Bercham's lean throat. He was tense now, and there were little muscles knotting and twitching along his hard jaws.

There in the corral was Flash, his big red sorrel. There were two other horses with Flash—a leggy black, and a big, jug-headed grulla that the sheriff used for trips down into the badlands. And all three of the horses were standing like statues, ears pointing toward thick brush just outside the corral. Tom Bercham could see the nostrils of the three horses dilate and quiver as they sniffed the warm air.

Tom swung his gaze to the thick brush, watching as much of it as he could see. A low, hate-filled snarl rattled in his throat after a moment's scrutiny, for he saw a bush wiggle, and caught the glare of a bright red shirt through the green

Sheriff Jerome watched quietly

foliage. He saw other bushes moving now, and realized fully just what was what.

"Gun trap!" he ripped out savagely. "Damn Buck Leslie's heart, he aimed to have me shot the minute I stepped out this back door!"

Tom jerked erect, lean features white with rage. His first impulse was to jerk that back door open and step out with a gun talking from each fist. He could smoke those men out of the brush along the corral, and account for at least part of the bunch before he went down. But saner thoughts prevailed after a moment, and he realized the utter foolishness of such a course. He had tumbled to the set-up in time, and told himself grimly that the thing to do now was outwit Buck Leslie and those hired killers. But just how could he out-fox that pack?

IT STOOD to reason that Leslie would have men in front of the jail, and perhaps others strung along the sides. Leslie was not the sort to take chances on letting plans backfire through carelessness. He would have men at the front of the jail, no doubt of that. But how many?

"It stands to reason that the mangy son would figger on me headin' for the corral after a hoss," Tom Bercham gritted. "Which means that he'd have most of his gang planted in the bushes out yonder. With a little luck, maybe I can get past whoever is watchin' the front."

Tom was already striding up the narrow corridor toward the sheriff's cubby-hole office. But he walked with more care now, making sure that his boots did not scrape or jar over the concrete floor. He edged out into the sheriff's office and went swiftly, silently to a side window.

A careful look through a corner of the lower pane showed him nothing to cause alarm. But when he peered out a similar window on the opposite side of the room a moment later he saw a runty, stoop-shouldered little jasper crouching at the front corner of the building, a sawed-off shotgun gripped in grimy hands.

"Frog Spellman," Tom muttered under his breath. "An' the way he's nursin' that scattergun means I'll get a bellyful of lead the minute he sees me."

TOM gripped the window sash, began lifting it gently. It rose about six inches without a sound, then stuck stubbornly. Tom growled under his breath, knowing that to force the sash any higher might cause it to rattle, which would attract the attention of that T Bar gunman who crouched only a few feet away.

"Damn!" Tom said bitterly, for he had hoped to get the window up, ease through it, and take the gunman by surprise. But that was out of the question now, and he was about to turn away when he saw Spellman lift one hand from his wicked weapon and motion to someone who evidently stood somewhere at the front of the building.

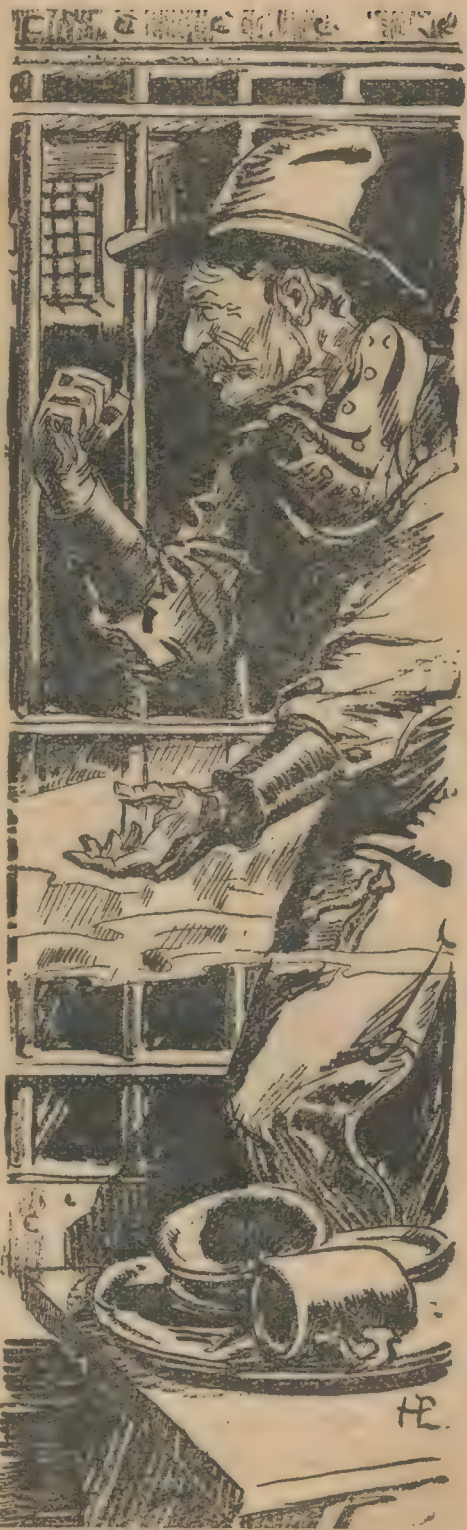
"More than one of the snakes!" Tom thought bitterly, and crouched until only his eye and a small portion of his face showed around the window sill. He saw a long shadow slide past Frog Spellman, then a gangly man joined him.

"Soapy Anson," Tom whispered to himself. "Hell, what a prize pair of back shooters Buck Leslie set to watch the front door. An' mebbe there's more of their breed handy. Looks like I won't—" Just then the voice of Frog Spellman came plainly through the open window.

"Reckon that damned fool aims to wait the full hour, like Buck told him to." Frog's voice held a note of sullen protest. "Hell, man, we could walk down to the Silver Cask an' git us a drink, easy."

"Say, Buck would shoot us if we done that, yuh fool!" Soapy Anson growled through a black stubble of beard that hid most of his lean, ugly face. He flicked beady black eyes down the street, however, evidently wishing that he could belly up to the Silver Cask bar.

"Aw, that blasted Bercham will head out back when he leaves the



Bat Upton roared in protest

place," Frog argued. "One o' us could go git a bottle, anyhow."

"Well, now, mebbe Buck wouldn't mind if we done that," Soapy Anson decided, tugging at the greasy red neckerchief about his unwashed neck. "Tell yuh what, Frog," he went on after a moment, "yuh go fetch a bottle while I stand guard. I'll set down on the step an' lean back agin the front door so's that Bercham feller shore can't git past me."

"Shore, I'll go," Frog agreed, handing over his scattergun. "If Buck should come up an' ask where I am, make him think I went down yonder ter tell them gawkin' jaspers that the sheriff set us ter watch the jail. I don't like the way them fools are watchin' us, nohow."

Tom Bercham glanced quickly down the street to see a bunch of men apparently loafing before the Silver Cask and the big general store just beyond the saloon. But those hombres were not exactly loafing, for they were watching the jail. Or rather, they were watching the two T Bar men who were there at the front of the jail.

Those curious hombres might prove dangerous, Tom realized suddenly, in case he managed to make a break from this coop. And he felt pretty sure that he now had a chance to make a break.

Whirling away from the window, he stepped noiselessly to the big front door, tripped the wrought iron latch, set his shoulder against it, and wedged a scarred boot toe against the bottom. He wanted it to feel perfectly solid when Soapy Anson sat down on the step and leaned back against it.

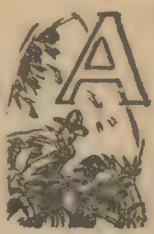
Tom heard the clump of boots on the flat stone step outside the door now, and became as tense as bunching muscles could make him. He heard the soft scrape of those boots shuffling about. Then a man grunted and there was a pressure against the heavy door.

Tom Bercham slid his right hand down, lifted his Colt, and stepped swiftly back and to one side. The door flung open. Soapy Anson leaned far back, pawing the air with one hand, balancing Frog Spellman's shotgun in the other.

Tom Bercham leaped, drawn Colt whipping down. The gun barrel landed with a dull thud, and at the same moment Tom fastened strong fingers in Soapy Anson's greasy shirt collar, yanking him swiftly into the room. He kicked the door shut, and glanced down just in time to see Soapy snake a six-gun from a holster and start the muzzle tilting up!

CHAPTER VI

"Elevate!"



A SHOT there in the sheriff's office would have brought Buck Leslie and his hirelings on the jump. And it would have brought the whole town down to the jail.

These thoughts seared across Tom Bercham's brain in the space of time it took him to jerk back his heavy boot and kick at Soapy Anson's upflung hand. The blunt toe caught the T Bar gunman's wrist just below the heel of the hand.

There came a dull snap, and Anson's lips writhed in pain. The big .45 flew from his fingers, skidded across the floor and lodged against a leg of the sheriff's desk.

Anson's cheeks were pasty above the black beard. He stared in horror at his gun hand. The hand was twisted queerly above the wrist.

"Busted!" Soapy Anson croaked. "Yuh busted my arm, Bercham! I—"

"You'll get a bullet through that skull of yore'n if yuh make any fuss! Keep still, skunk, or I'll let daylight into your brains."

Soapy Anson took one look into Tom Bercham's snarling eyes and decided to keep quiet. Even when Tom bent over and began stripping the clothes from him, Soapy kept his mouth shut.

He was sick, for now the numbness was passing and that wrist was

beginning to throb horribly. He made a little gagging sound in his corded throat when Tom rolled him over, but offered no protest as his trousers were tugged off over his booted feet.

Next came the soiled green shirt and the dirty red neckerchief. When Soapy Anson had nothing but his long white underwear and boots left, Tom Bercham stepped back, crinkling his nose at the shirt, trousers and neckerchief he had taken from the gunman.

"I hate to even get close to these duds, much less wear 'em," Tom growled. "But I'll have to put the things on, even if they do smell one hell of a lot like skunk."

He removed his crisscrossed gunbelts, then stepped quickly into Soapy Anson's trousers. A few moments later Tom was tugging Anson's greasy brown Stetson down over his red hair. He folded his own Stetson, stuck it inside his shirt.

"I've put these duds on over my own clothes, Anson," Tom snarled. "They fit tight, but mebbe nobody will notice that. Once I git away I'll take these things off an' toss 'em to the buzzards."

He dumped the contents of Anson's pockets on the floor, then turned quickly toward the door. But on second thought he went back, tore a sleeve from Soapy's thick undershirt, and gagged the fellow with it.

There was a frayed rope hanging from a wall peg behind the sheriff's desk.

It took Tom Bercham but a moment to get the rope and bind Anson's good hand and his feet together behind him. In that drawn-up position the crippled killer could do mighty little lunging around.

"*Adios*, snake," Tom called grimly. "I reckon some of your pards will run onto you sooner or later."

He pulled Anson's hat down low, picked up the wicked shotgun, and went slowly out the door. The bunch of men were still standing before the Silver Cask and the store. But they were paying attention to Frog Spellman now, who stood in the saloon door, gesturing wildly as he talked.

Tom Bercham figured to meander slowly down the street until he came to a saddled horse. But he saw now that luck had finally done him a good turn. Not twenty paces away stood two saddled horses, and Tom instantly recognized a big, rat-tailed strawberry roan as Soapy Anson's mount. Soapy had taken first calf-roping money in the local rodeos three years running, thanks to the speed and savvy of that strawberry roan.

Tom Bercham assumed Soapy Anson's loose-jointed gait as best he could, heading for the roan at an easy walk. He grinned mirthlessly when the horse snorted, ears cocked forward inquiringly.

"Even if I have got on your master's duds you know I'm not him." Tom spoke more to quiet the horse than anything else. "Steady, boy. I'll treat you a lot better than that Anson snake ever did."

He was in beside the horse now, testing the cinches with a quick hand, eyes darting sharp glances right and left. He flipped the reins from the scarred hitching bar. The roan snorted, ears flattened, nostrils distended.

"Easy!" Tom Bercham growled. "Snap at me an' I'll wallop you."

The puncher's voice was low, and the roan seemed reassured. Tom eased the reins up over the arched neck, twisted a stirrup, and stuck his boot toe in it. He lifted himself to the saddle then, eyes raking the group of men before the Silver Cask, right hand held close to the cedar butt of the six-gun on that side.

THE men who listened to Frog Spellman did not see Tom as he turned the horse up the street and rode away at a walk. But he glimpsed a man darting swiftly toward the back of the jail from the corral.

Tom Bercham knew instantly that he had been watched by those men who had waited in the brush near the corral to kill him if he came out

that way. He knew, too, that he could never ride out now without trouble, for it was a hundred yards or more up the street to where the road cut through brush thick enough to hide a man and horse.

But there was one thing he could do, and that was get the jump on those killers who were still huddled in the brush around the corral. He took the bridle reins in his teeth, drew both six-shooters, and jammed his spurless heels hard against the roan's ribs. The big horse snorted, leaped mightily. Tom flattened over the saddle horn as the roan stormed past the front of the jail.

FROM somewhere behind him lifted a wail of angry protest. Spellman had seen him, and was wanting to know why he was leaving. But Frog thought he was yelling at Soapy Anson, and Tom discounted the little killer for the time being.

Tom's attention was on the side of the jail, which was now in view. A man spurted around the back corner of the building, started down the wall. He saw Tom, ploughed to a halt and yelled something. Tom's left hand Colt spewed flaming thunder, and the T Bar man who had yelled at him tripped over his own feet and fell in his futile haste to dodge a bullet that had screamed past his ear.

Tom Bercham's teeth gleamed white against the black leather reins they were gripping now as he grinned coldly. For a space of twenty yards he would be riding where he could see that brush along the corral behind the jail. And as the big strawberry roan thundered across the short space, Tom Bercham's guns sent a hellish hail of lead into that brush.

Yelling, frightened gunmen poured forth like rabbits fleeing a grass fire. But by the time they had collected their wits enough to half guess what had happened, Tom Bercham was out of sight, the strawberry roan carrying him swiftly down the street.

Tom glanced back once, smoking guns still clutched in his lean hands. Frog Spellman and those others had run out into the street and were staring after him, evidently at a loss to understand what was happening. Tom holstered his guns then, took the bridle reins in his left hand, and yelled at the roan for more speed.

"Frog an' them others think I'm your master," Bercham chuckled grimly. "They could pot us, but they don't savvy what's up. Rattle your hocks, before the sidewinders come out of their trance," he urged the horse.

The roan leveled out, great lean muscles propelling him forward at a terrific rate. Tom Bercham knew then that he had a horse under him that could, if properly handled, take him beyond the reach of the pursuit that was sure to come. Tom pulled the roan in a little, knowing that the horse should not be pushed too hard before it had a chance to warm up properly.

He came to the end of the street, swung sharply with the main trail, and a screen of brush stretched between him and the town. This trail pointed south, and Tom remembered grimly that Buck Leslie had wanted him to head down it.

"That jasper is slick," Tom mused as he let the roan hammer along the trail at a good clip. "He figgered I'd be lookin' for trouble down the trail instead of there in town. An' if I hadn't noticed the way the hosses in the corral was actin', I would've walked smack into his little trap."

Tom reloaded his guns one at a time, eyes held broodingly on the trail ahead. He was nearing hills now, and the ground was getting rough. He topped a gentle rise, glanced back. At the edge of the town dust was spiraling up to flatten off northward as the breeze caught it.

"The race is on, hoss," Tom grunted. "Only it'll not be a race if my plan will work."

Tom Bercham did not want to go

south. But he wanted Buck Leslie and the rest who were after him to think that he had headed straight for the Border. Therefore he slowed down, deliberately sky-lining himself on the next ridge. That he had been seen he had no doubt, for those riders were drawing swiftly closer. He looked back and saw them stringing out along the trail, arms pumping up and down as they plied quirts.

Tom dipped from the ridge, spurred down into a rocky little basin that was walled in by low, brushy hills. He knew that this rocky outcropping lasted for another mile, and decided that here was his chance to give the pursuers a setback if not actually get rid of them.

He swerved the big roan from the trail, heading into a twisting draw that cut back into the hills. He guided the horse over the roughest ground he could find, satisfied that it would take mighty keen eyes to pick up his sign when the disappointed killers turned back to find where he had quit the trail. He worked his way as fast as possible over the rough going, ears keened for sounds.

HE heard hoofs pounding after a few minutes. From the cover of a cedar thicket he watched a score of men whirl through the rocky basin he had left. Buck Leslie was leading the pack, an unsheathed six-gun clutched in a pudgy fist.

Tom Bercham watched until the horde was well past, then turned the roan on into the hills. He stuck to tight ground for a half hour, then hunted better footing for the horse in order to make better time. Tom circled gradually to the north, heading for the Block B—his spread now that his uncle was gone.

Somber-eyed, Tom rode steadily, his mind struggling with the many problems confronting him. He stopped once, and that was to rip away the grimy garments he had taken from Soapy Anson. With his own Stetson on his head and the reassuring feel of his own neckerchief against his throat, he mounted and rode on.

Tom turned the roan on into the hills

But it was still three hours or more before nightfall when he reached the Block B range. He reined in atop a cedar-clad ridge, stroking the roan's sweaty neck as he thought about riding on up to the ranchhouse.

"Reckon I'd better wait until dark," he decided aloud. "No use gittin' that hot-headed Bat Upton an' the other boys mixed into trouble. Come on, hoss. We'll bed down over yonder in Lost Canyon until dark."

There was a line camp in the deep well-watered valley known as Lost Canyon. It was an ideal place to

hold cattle in the winter, for the brakes afforded feed and the tall hills lifting above it sheltered stock from winter storms.

Tom Bercham rode down into the canyon, deep in his own thoughts. He passed the log cabin that sat under huge sycamore and cottonwood trees near a clear stream. Beyond the cabin was a corral and barn. There would be feed in the barn for the horse, for it had been stocked up during the spring roundup.

Mind completely absorbed with his problems, Tom Bercham dismounted at the corral gate, led his horse through, and went on toward the barn. He saw that the lock was missing from the door, and wondered which lazy cowpoke had neglected to put it back after the spring roundup.

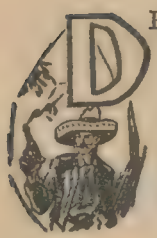
Tom reached for the door—and rocked back barely in time to keep it from slapping him down. There in the open doorway stood grim old Sheriff Cal Jerome, scowling darkly down the barrel of a cocked .45.

"Elevate, Tom!" the sheriff rapped out.

"Hell!" Tom Bercham swore wearily and lifted his hands.

CHAPTER VII

A Man Dies



DEFTLY the sheriff took Tom's guns, scowling and muttering angrily as he jammed the weapons into the waistband of his own trousers.

"How'd yuh git out o' the coop, yuh crazy young burro?" the officer demanded. "Dang it, I wanted yuh in jail."

"So I figgered," Tom growled wearily. "Mebbe you also wanted me killed off, eh?"

"Say, what are yuh drivin' at?" the sheriff demanded.

"Nothin' much," Tom snapped. "You waltz out here an' hole up like a badger with the bellyache while the town gits red-eyed on lynch talk. Then along comes a friendly-actin' polecat with only two legs an' lets me out of your jail. Only there happened to be a dozen or so gents watchin' over gun sights for me to come out that jail's back door."

"What are yuh talkin' about?" the sheriff asked sharply. "Who let yuh out o' jail an' who was waitin' to drill yuh? An' how come yuh didn't git drilled if there was a bunch waitin' to do it?"

"Some hosses told me where most of the killers was hidin'," Tom shrugged. "Then I figgered out a way to handle the skunk that was at the front door of the jail."

"*Hosses* told yuh?" the old sheriff snorted. "Say, do yuh think I'll believe that?"

"I don't give a hoot in hell what you believe," Tom grated. "Right now, I aim to water an' feed this roan. He'll have to rest some before you cart me back to that coop you call a jail."

"Go ahead an' take care o' the roan," the sheriff grunted. "An' while yuh're doin' it, mebbe yuh'll tell me how yuh happen to be forkin' Soapy Anson's bronc."

"You plumb astound me, Sheriff," Tom drawled bitingly. "Why, it shore is bafflin' how yuh ever figgered out that I was ridin' a stolen hoss. Remember to charge me with that when we get back to town!"

"Lippy, are yuh?" the sheriff growled, flushing darkly under the jibe. "Yuh know blamed well every woman, kid an' even the sheep herders in this country know that ropin' hoss o' Soapy's on sight. Where yuh git him?" he demanded.

"Stole him," Tom shrugged, and led the roan to a watering trough in one corner of the corral.

There was a dug well behind the trough, and Tom stepped around to begin hauling up buckets of cool, clear water. He let the roan drink, but did not give the overheated animal a chance to drink too much. He led the horse into the barn, stopped short to stare at two other horses that were already there.

"Say, who's out here with yuh, Sheriff?" he demanded.

The officer snarled something, gave Tom a prod with a gun muzzle. "Git on in there an' feed that hoss," the old officer snorted. "Then I'm takin' yuh up to the cabin."

Tom obeyed, since there was little else he could do. When the roan was munching contentedly, Tom was herded from the barn and finally to the door of the little cabin. He opened it, stepped into the long, low-ceilinged room. He stood blinking until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, then swore sharply in surprise. Propped in one of the wall bunks was old Roy Taylor, staring wide-eyed at him!

"Say, what does this add up to?" Tom barked. "Roy, that nephew of yore'n spread it around town that you was dead."

"Dang it, why didn't yuh stay in jail?" Roy Taylor demanded.

"That's what I been tryin' to find out, Roy," Sheriff Jerome answered. "Tom, set down over there, an' tell us what took place in town."

The sheriff waved a lean hand toward a nail keg that served as a chair, and Tom Bercham slumped down on it, twisting so that he could see both the old men at the same time.

"Just what are you two razorbacks up to?" Tom asked pointedly. "We'll not git any place by squabblin', an' you know it. What say we put our cards on the table?"

"The boy is right, Cal," old Roy Taylor told the sheriff. "May as well tell him, hadn't we?"

"Buck Leslie thought he was tellin' the truth when he said that Roy, there, was dead." The sheriff spoke slowly, calmly. "Doc Sawyer helped out, by puttin' out a report to that effect. It was the only way, Tom, that we could work it so's a certain killer would overplay his hand. That's all yuh need to know, right now, anyway."

Tom Bercham had been studying the two men intently, listening almost absent-mindedly to what the sheriff had said. Tom saw that the old-timers were worried.

He laughed suddenly, yet there was no mirth in the sound. "All I need to know, eh?" he ground out bitterly. "I could tell you two a few things that'd make yore hair curl. But first, Roy, I want to know why yuh made out that I killed my own uncle, then plugged you an' that snake-eyed Sam Flint?"

"Roy never accused yuh o' nothin' like that, yuh bull-headed young jack!" Sheriff Jerome growled. "Roy asked me to lock yuh up, shore. But he was tryin' to protect yuh, Tom. Tryin' to keep yuh out o' trouble."

Tom flushed a little, eyes fixing quickly on Roy Taylor's pinched face. "That right?" he asked quietly.

The T Bar owner nodded his white head, eyes filled with misery. "That's right, son," he said slowly. "Trouble is gonna pop all over this country, an' I—I wanted yuh to come through with a whole skin."

"An' instead of doin' somethin' kindly in turn, I'll have to hurt you some, Roy," Tom Bercham said grimly. "I hate like sin t' do it, but I've got to. If I didn't, yuh might go on makin' mistakes like you an' Uncle Frank have been makin' these past five years."

"What—what are yuh drivin' at?" Roy Taylor gasped out the words, staring intently at Tom.

TOM took a long breath, as if ready to dive headlong into deep water. "That nephew o' yore'n is behind all the murder an' rustlin' that has been goin' on around here," he blurted out.

"Roy, I've known fer two years that Buck was stealin' from you an' from Uncle Frank. He's t' blame for my uncle's death. An' it was his idea that you git killed down there at the forks of the trail this mornin'."

"How—did yuh—find—out?" Roy Taylor rasped out the words.

Tom Bercham looked at the old man with slowly widening eyes. "You knew?" he asked finally.

"Shore, I know, now." Roy Taylor leaned back, closing his eyes as he answered. "So somebody talked to yuh, eh?"

"Nobody talked to me," Tom snapped. "I figgered the thing out myself, while I was in that blasted cell. Who else but Buck Leslie would want you an' Uncle Frank both out of the way?"

"An' why would Buck want that?" the sheriff asked, speaking for the first time in several minutes.

"Because the damned snake wants to strip the Block B an' the T Bar ranges of stock!" Tom flung out hotly. "Fer two years, I've been tryin' to catch that jasper red-handed. I wanted to git the goods on him, then scare him out of the country. The Block B an' T Bar outfits never had a bit of trouble until that damned Buck Leslie showed up here."

"Why didn't yuh tell Frank an' me what yuh knowed, son?" Roy Taylor asked hoarsely. "Mebbe—things wouldn't have turned out like they did if yuh had told us."

"I tried to git Uncle Frank t' listen," Tom Bercham answered. "An' I was makin' headway, even if he did snort an' sputter an' accuse me of stickin' up fer you. I wanted t' come to you, Roy, an' tell yuh what I knew. But—I was afraid you'd blow up on me, an' spout off where Buck Leslie could hear."

"I—I likely would have, too," Taylor choked. "Son, I've been a plain damned fool. So was pore ol' Frank, that was like a brother to me. Fool's range, that's what this country become the day Frank Bercham an' me quit trustin' each other."

"But there's nothin' foolish about startin' a clean-up," Tom clipped. "Roy, there's not a man on yore spread that you could trust. Did yuh realize that?"

"Not until this mornin'," Roy Taylor answered without opening his eyes. "Sam Flint got scared when he looked death in the face, an' told me the whole story. You called the play when yuh said Buck aimed to git rid of yore uncle an' me so's he could strip our ranges. I had yuh locked in jail, son, in the hope that yuh'd not git caught in the crossfire o' the clean-up."

"But I've got to help," Tom snapped. "Don't yuh see that? Cain't yuh see that it's my job to help—Uncle Roy?"

TAYLOR'S eyes opened then, and a faint smile touched his lips. "Yuh—yuh ain't called me 'uncle' since—since me an' Frank fell out five years ago, boy," he said wearily. "It's good to hear yuh call me that. An' it's good to know that yuh don't—don't blame me for bein' behind Frank's death. After all, my money paid the damned killer that got him."

"But he got Flint, which likely made him feel better," Tom said grimly. "An' the fact that he drilled Flint to save yore life proves that in his heart he was not yore enemy, Uncle Roy."

"It's gittin' dark," Roy Taylor said slowly. "We better not light a lamp, for some o' them hellions that I've been payin' wages to might see the light an' come nosin' past. But if yuh will come a little closer, son, I'll tell yuh why I sent fer Lawyer Wilson afore I—left town. Yuh see, I wanted—wanted—"

The sheriff and Tom Bercham were beside the bunk now, their eyes wide in alarm. The sun was streaming brightly into the room through a west window, yet Roy Taylor had said that it was getting dark!

"Say, buck up, Roy," the sheriff said gruffly. "Here, let me have a look at them bandages. Makin' that ride out here from town was a fool stunt. I—"

"Fool's range!" Roy Taylor gasped. "Shucks, Frank, we never was really mad at each other, now was we? Shake, will yuh, Frank, an' we'll call it all square. That suit yuh, pard? Will yuh—shake—hands—with—me?"

Tom Bercham grasped the thin old hand that was stretching out feebly. He gripped the fingers, and felt a cold dread pour through him.

Sheriff Cal Jerome gasped as he peeled the old cattlemans' shirt up at the back and glanced at sagging, blood-soaked bandages. "Tom, give me a hand. These bandages have slipped, an'—"

"Too late, Sheriff," Tom said in a choked voice; for the lean old hand of Roy Taylor had suddenly gone limp in his grip.

CHAPTER VIII

The Attack

JEROME and young Tom Bercham laid old Roy Taylor out in the bunk in which he had died. When the gaunt form was covered with a blanket, Tom and the sheriff stood looking at each other silently.

The sheriff lifted a knobby hand, dragged a trickle of moisture from each leathery cheek in an angry swipe. "Two good men dead—Roy Taylor an' Frank Bercham," he growled. "Tom, I hope to God I can pin this on Buck Leslie. Shootin' is too good for that snake! I want him alive, so's I can watch him shiver an' squirm in a cell while he waits for the hangman's noose. Yuh hear me? I want him alive!"

"He didn't kill either of these men today with his own hands, so the law might not see fit to hang him." Tom Bercham forced the words through his dry throat. "*I* want Buck Leslie over my gun sight, Sheriff."

The officer stepped to the table in the middle of the room, opened up a gunny sack, and took out a pint bottle. He gouged the cork out, turned to a cupboard that was a soap box nailed to the wall behind the cook stove, and brought out two white cups. He poured a drink into each, handed one to Tom Bercham.

"Here's to a cure for the ills that are gnawin' at the vitals o' this country, son," the old sheriff toasted grimly. "Here's to a permanent cure fer them ills—a *gun cure!*"

They drained their cups, set them on the table. They kept their faces averted from the bunk, rolled brown cigarettes. The scraping of two matches sounded unnaturally loud in the small room.

"Roy insisted on ridin' out here alone," the sheriff spoke after he had inhaled deeply. "Doc an' me couldn't make him see otherwise, fer Roy aimed to keep out o' sight, let that blasted nephew o' his think he was dead.

"The ride made the bandages slip, let that wound come open," the sheriff went on after a short pause. "If I'd been with him, I would have seen the blood comin' through his shirt in time to tighten the bandages an' save his life."

"Don't blame yourself, Sheriff," Tom Bercham said. "Roy Taylor played his hand out the way he wanted to, except he didn't live t' see Buck Leslie gun-cured. Which is mebbe the way the Big Boss up yonder meant it to be."

"Mebbe yuh're right, son," the sheriff said huskily, reaching for the bottle again. "I had to seem like I fell for a yarn a couple o' T Bar gunnies spilled, about seein' rustlers at work on some o' Roy's beeves. We found some cattle bunched like them buzzards aimed I should, but no men around. I ducked through the hills soon as I could an' come here."

Tom Bercham told swiftly how he had escaped jail and the gun trap that had been set for him. The grizzled sheriff swore savagely, gnarled hand caressing the butt of his long Colt.

"How many men have yuh got on the Block B?" the sheriff asked grimly.

"Six, not countin' Big Charlie, the cook," Tom answered. "But if yuh're figgerin' on help from my men, Sheriff, you may as well forgit it."

"Eh?" the sheriff jerked out in surprise. "What do yuh mean, Tom?"

"Outside o' Big Charlie an' old Bat Upton, I wouldn't trust those punchers of mine too far," Tom Bercham answered wearily. "I've been watchin' some o' those jaspers sneak off nights to meet T Bar gun hawks, Sheriff. Mebbe I'm oversuspicious. On the other hand Buck Leslie an' his thievin' bunch have allus known exactly where to find choice bunches o' Block B cattle when they wanted t' make a raid."

"Sizzlin' sidewinders!" the sheriff cried. "Then it's you, Big Charlie, Bat Upton an' me against Buck Leslie an' his gang. Wonder how many men Buck has got?"

"Twenty, mebbe more, if yuh count the saloon bums an' tin-horn gamblers that take orders from him around town," Tom growled. "But I wouldn't care if that snake had an army, Sheriff. He's got t' be stopped!"

"Pore old Roy was afraid yuh'd look at it that way, son." The sheriff jerked a hand toward the blanketed figure on the bunk. "That's why he asked me to lock yuh up until the trouble was over. Roy Taylor looked on yuh like yuh was his own, Tom."

"Shore, I know." Tom nodded. "Him an' Uncle Frank raised me after my own folks died. I was five years old when Uncle Frank an' Uncle Roy took me in. An' there was never a bad word passed amongst the three of us until that damned Buck Leslie come hornin' into this country. I'll settle accounts with that skunk, Sheriff, if it's the last thing I ever do."

"It will be the last thing yuh do, son, if yuh don't cool down afore yuh set out after Buck Leslie's hide," the sheriff warned. "Never let a enemy git yuh crazy mad, Tom. It gives him the advantage."

Tom nodded, but did not speak. He knew well enough that the grim-eyed sheriff was right. And Tom Bercham knew that the sheriff spoke from experience, for the leathery old fellow had brought law and order into this wild country and made it stick over a period of ten long years.

Yet Tom Bercham couldn't fight down completely that blazing rage that burned through him. He kept seeing his uncle's dead face, kept remembering how Roy Taylor had died only a few minutes ago, calling pitifully to the friend he had been turned against by the devilish schemes of Buck Leslie.

Buck Leslie had stolen from both outfits, and planted evidence that made the two old friends suspect each other. And now Buck Leslie had brought about the death of those two old men.

Tom Bercham swore savagely under his breath, pacing restlessly up and down the cabin floor. "Gun cure!" he flung out after a long silence in which the sheriff had sat watching him moodily. "Yuh named it, Sheriff. There's only one way to cure Buck Leslie an' his skunk-scented outfit. An' that's to gun cure the mangy sons, every last one of 'em!"

"Uh-huh," the sheriff grunted. "But that's a big order, son. Remember what I told yuh about gittin' yore mad up."

Tom resumed his pacing, brain writhing under the strain of savage anger. The sun went down finally, leaving an ominous red splash of light against the hills and sky in the west. Tom Bercham stared at the reddened horizon, and it seemed reflected in his glittering eyes as he stood looking through the window.

That big roan would be rested somewhat by now. Tom half turned from the window, lips opening to speak to the sheriff. But no words escaped—

THE window pane before him was shattered, showering him with particles of glass that pricked the skin along his cheek and neck. He dived sideward instinctively, although he had already heard the whispering hiss of a bullet passing his neck.

There was another crash now, followed closely by still another. The windows in each end of the cabin became splintered things, and there was the angry thudding of bullets burying themselves in the log walls.

"Down!" Tom Bercham cried, twisting toward the sheriff. "Hit the floor, Sheriff, or—Good gosh!"

The lean old officer had been in the act of crossing the room at a half crouch, six-gun out and cocked. Tom Bercham saw what the sheriff intended to do, for he was heading straight for one of those windows through which bullets were humming. But even as Tom yelled his

warning the sheriff jerked half around. He dropped his Colt, made a wry face, then wilted slowly, pawing feebly at a swiftly spreading red stain on the front of his faded grey shirt.

Tom Bercham had no time now to see how badly the sheriff was wounded. From somewhere outside came a roaring voice, ordering a rush on the cabin. Tom heard booted feet hammering toward the door and windows. He heard, too, the Cain cries of the killer pack as they charged seemingly from all directions. But above those lurid oaths and yells of savage triumph came a voice that made Tom Bercham grow white with rage.

He had recognized the voice of Buck Leslie, could hear him directing the attack on the cabin.

CHAPTER IX

"I'm Goin' Outside!"

RAGING mad, he ran across the cabin, yet kept beneath those windows through which slugs were humming more furiously than ever. He seized the heavy, home-made table by a leg, dragged it to the front door, overturned it quietly, and wedged it there solidly. He dropped a bar into place across the door, then turned his attention to the flimsy back door. There, he knew, was the main danger, for one man could break the thin planks of the back door if he tried hard enough. And there were many men swarming about the cabin, shooting and yelling fiendishly.

Tom Bercham squatted there on the floor, his back protected by the thick table which was holding the front door. In that position he could see the two end windows and the back door, for the cabin was small.

He heard someone rattle the latch on the door behind him, but paid no attention to it. He drew both guns, cocked them, and laid them on the floor before him. Now his fingers plucked brass cartridges from the loops of his crisscrossed belt. He piled the cartridges on the floor within easy reach, then lifted his guns.

Men were lunging against the door at his back, cursing when it failed to give. But Tom Bercham kept his eyes on that back door, straining to see through the swiftly gathering dusk. He saw the door shiver suddenly, and realized that a man had tried to open it quietly. Then the door swayed threateningly, and Tom Bercham's guns beat a swift thunder.

He heard a faint, strangled yell, and grinned mirthlessly. The very flimsiness of that door was an asset as well as a liability. It could be broken down easily, no doubt of that. On the other hand, slugs could crash through it and into whomever happened to be in range.

Now something darkened an end window, and Tom flicked a gun sideward, firing a single shot. He was rewarded with a choked yell, and heard some hombre slide limply down the log wall. Then his other gun swung on the window at the opposite end of the room where a faint crashing of glass had warned him that another jasper was trying to crawl through. Tom Bercham's gun cracked viciously, and he heard a wild oath and the pounding of boots.

"Missed, but shore throwed a scare into him," Tom mused grimly.

He twisted his neck, peering intently at the window which was in the wall behind him. There was too much jagged glass hanging in the frame for a man to come through without making a fuss. Yet Tom was worried about that window, for it was impossible for him to keep an eye on it constantly.

"Keep low, yuh fools!" Buck Leslie's voice boomed from close to the back door. "That snake has already kilt Lon an' Warty. Cain't yuh jaspers use yore heads?"

"We done what yuh said, Buck, which was rush the place," a harsh voice called. "An' I danged nigh

butted a bullet when I tried t' ease in a end winder. So he got Lon an' Warty, did he?"

"Bercham ain't alone in thar," a third man declared. "Buck, I jest come from the barn. Thar's two other hosses in thar besides the roan Bercham stole from Soapy. Them other two hosses has been rode recent, too."

Silence followed that, and Tom Bercham could picture the murderous gang staring uneasily at each other as they groped for an answer to the riddle of those two other horses in the barn.

Tom decided suddenly that he would have time to see how badly the sheriff was hit. He scuttled across the floor, treading soundlessly. He reached the lean old officer and was bending to peer into the gloom when a lance of powder blaze speared into the room from one of the end windows.

Tom winced, for the bullet had ripped through his shirt, leaving a stinging blister along his side. He chopped his own weapons at the window and fired. But the bushwacker had ducked, and Tom knew that he had missed.

HE bent over the sheriff again. The man's eyes were shut, which was reassuring, for had he been dead his eyes would have been open and staring. Tom glanced swiftly around at the three windows, then laid down both guns.

In a few quick motions he had the officer's shirt and undershirt peeled back, and was feeling for the wound. He shuddered a little as his fingers encountered clotted blood and torn flesh. But more probing told him that the sheriff's wound was not necessarily fatal.

The bullet had smashed into a rib, and glanced around and back toward the sheriff's right armpit. There was at least one rib broken, and the flattened slug had torn a gaping hole where it came out of the flesh. But the wound was not bleeding excessively, and Tom could feel the man's heart beating strongly.

He glanced swiftly at the windows again, then began tearing the officer's undershirt into strips. It was hard, working there in the dark and having to keep his eyes roving around those windows. But Tom managed to get a compress over the wound, and bind it there with strips of the stout cloth.

He stopped his work once to snatch a Colt and send a slug squalling through the flimsy back door. He heard an angry snarl, and the slog of hastily retreating feet. He had missed, but his slug had evidently discouraged whoever had monkeyed with the door.

Tom laid his gun down, finished knotting the crude bandages, and was again picking up his weapons when the sheriff sighed wearily. "Thanks son," the old officer said quietly. "That feels a heap better already."

"Gosh, I thought you were out cold," Tom whispered. "Don't lift yore voice again, Sheriff. Buck Leslie an' his outfit have got us surrounded. It looks plenty bad, if yuh ask me."

Tom had removed all articles from the table before overturning it to use as a shield at the front door. He remembered the bottle of whiskey he had placed near the wall with the two white cups and scrambled across the floor at a low crouch. He found the bottle and one cup, then hurried back to the sheriff. Tom poured a generous quantity of the fiery liquid into the cup, then held the sheriff's shoulders up.

"Here, take this," Tom whispered. "A stiff drink will like make yuh feel better."

The sheriff groped for the cup with his left hand, drained it without pausing, then lay back. "That side hurts, but I ain't plumb out o' the runnin'," he said grimly. "Leave that bottle an' my six-shooter handy, son. I'll watch the front window an' that one in the north end o' the room from here."

"Keno!" Tom gritted softly. "That'll leave me the south window an' the back door t' look out fer. Maybe we'll beat these buzzards yet, Sheriff."

Tom Bercham did not feel nearly so enthusiastic as he tried to make his voice sound, however. He was worried over the prolonged silence of Buck Leslie and his killer crew. Since they had discovered the three horses in the barn, there had been no more shouting and no more attempted rushes.

Tom could hear men prowling around outside, however, and knew only too well that Buck Leslie was hatching some fiendish scheme.

Tom Bercham thought of fire, and set his teeth against a groan of despair. The logs of the cabin were old and dry. Even a small fire built against one of those walls would soon have the whole place in flames.

"And it'd be just like that snake brain of Buck Leslie's t' figger that out," Tom snarled softly. "If I could only get a shot at that mangy son—"

Tom broke off, the idea growing rapidly in his mind. He made his way to where he had piled the cartridges on the floor, and began swiftly replacing the spent shells in his Colt cylinders with fresh ones. That completed, he thumbed shut the loading gates and quickly gathered the spare cartridges from the floor.

He stuffed the loose shells into his shirt pocket, leaving his Durham sack wedged on top of them. And now he began edging across the floor toward that back door.

"I'm havin' a look-see outside, Sheriff," Tom whispered tensely as he passed the old officer. "If I mebbe slide through the back door, don't git uneasy. An' if I come back in, I'll come crawling' flat acrost the sill. Shoot at anything that starts through the door any higher than the sill."

"Hold on!" the sheriff called hoarsely. "Son, yuh better not try—"

But Tom Bercham was already gone. He sidled silently to the back door, stopping where the log wall would protect him as he reached up. He slid back the bolt, then turned the knob slowly. Inch by inch, he opened the back door, pulling it in steadily, silently.

The night outside was velvety black, and Tom knew that a man would have to have mighty sharp eyes to detect the movement of that door. He listened intently, but could hear nothing.

Then he was through the door in a slithering motion. He went down across the stone step, instinctively hugging the cool earth as his eyes flashed right and left. Something moved yonder at the corner of the cabin, and Tom Bercham became rock still as he caught the silhouette of a man's head and shoulders limned against pale stars. Then the man snarled something, and walked straight toward Tom!

CHAPTER X

"They Got Us"

HIS LEAN, taut body lay pressed close to the wall of the cabin. His six-guns were in his hands, cocked. He watched the shadowy form of that hombre come along the wall.

Tom bunched his muscles slowly, drew his legs up for a quick spring. But the hombre who was coming along the wall swerved away, muttering something unintelligible.

Tom remembered then that there was a stack of wood against the wall, and realized that the man had had to turn out past it. He watched the fellow now, and could have touched his legs as he slogged past.

The man hesitated at the back stone step, and Tom Bercham could see his hatted head turning this way and that. Tom frowned in the darkness, for that hombre acted as if he were trying to approach the cabin without being seen by whoever might be outside.

The hombre stepped toward the door now, bent a little forward, and called: "Bercham! Don't shoot, Bercham. I'm a friend."

Tom got swiftly to his feet. A single step, and he was beside the stooping man, boring a gun into his

ribs. The fellow jumped nervously, swore in hoarse alarm.

"Just what do yuh want o' me, hombre?" Tom rasped in low tones. "An' who are yuh?"

"Doggone, yuh scared the liver out o' me, Bercham!" the man croaked. "I'm Lefty Fletcher."

"Fletcher, eh?" Tom rapped. "Yuh're one o' the new gun-slingers that Buck Leslie sent all the way t' Oklahoma fer. What in hell do yuh mean by claimin' t' be a friend o' mine?"

"Shore, I'm one o' the gents that come up from Oklahoma t' ride fer Buck Leslie," the man snarled. "Ed Bean was the other man—my pard."

"Which tells me that yuh're here tryin' t' collect my scalp 'cause Ed Bean was found dead on yore T Bar range this mornin'," Tom growled. "Get goin', Fletcher!"

"Sheriff Jerome is in thar with yuh, ain't he?" Lefty Fletcher asked grimly.

Tom hesitated, at a loss to understand Fletcher's play. The fellow had nerve, no doubt of that. More nerve, in fact, than a lot of other T Bar men. Tom had seen the lank, cold-eyed young gunman in town a few times, and had failed to see any of the professional killer earmarks on him.

The same applied to Ed Bean, Tom remembered now. Wild, tough as nails and full of hell, yes. But neither Ed Bean nor Lefty Fletcher had ever struck Tom as being downright killers.

"What if the sheriff *is* in the cabin?" Tom countered suddenly. "That any business of yore'n, Fletcher?"

"I'd like t' make it some, Bercham," came the grim reply. "I'd like t' tell the sheriff how my pard, Ed Bean, happened t' git kilt in that raid last night. That Buck Leslie jigger doublecrossed Ed an' me. It was him kilt Ed last night, fer I jest now heard him tellin' his men about it. He was braggin' that the Block B would take the blame."

Tom Bercham's pulse was racing. Here was the concrete proof the sheriff needed—evidence that would hang Buck Leslie! But could this Fletcher hombre be trusted? After all, he was a T Bar gunman, and this might be some smooth play that Buck Leslie had thought up.

STILL, Tom couldn't quite make himself believe it. There was a note of sincerity in Fletcher's voice, and a thin edge to his words that indicated smoldering anger.

"Fletcher, this may be a trick," Tom said huskily. "If it is, I'll put a bullet in yuh the minute yuh try somethin' funny."

"I'm payin' a doublecrosser back in his own coin," Lefty Fletcher snarled. "I hate a damned snake that'll welch on the bunch he runs with, an' I feel ten feet lower than a gnat's hip fer doin' this. I could shoot Buck Leslie, easy enough."

"But yuh want him hung, is that it?" Tom asked slowly. "Yuh want the fat son t' sit an' think things over, while he marks off days on a calendar that'll be hangin' in his cell. Yuh want Buck Leslie t' suffer some afore he dies. Ain't that it?"

"Yuh ought t' be one o' these politicians an' run fer somethin' or other," Lefty Fletcher growled. "I couldn't have said it jest that way, Bercham, but yuh shore as blazes told me jest what I want. Yuh'll let me see the sheriff?"

"What makes yuh think the sheriff is in thar?" Tom was still hedging, trying to make up his mind about Fletcher.

"Why, the sheriff's hoss is in the barn out yonder," the other answered promptly. "Buck Leslie is havin' a litter o' fits 'cause the boys are a mite skittish about tryin' t' smoke the sheriff out o' here along with you.

"Buck wants t' set fire to the place, an' I reckon the boys will finally come around to his side. Most of 'em are plain killers that'd do anything if the price was right."

"The sheriff is in thar," Tom said suddenly. "An' so is—Roy Taylor."

"The Old Man?" Lefty Fletcher echoed. "Why, damn Buck Leslie, he said the Old Man was dead. But

that suits me fine, Bercham. Taylor is a fine old feller, an' that nephew o' his'n aims t' rob him as well as yore outfit. Let me talk t' Taylor an' the sheriff afore it's too late, will yuh?"

"Taylor is dead," Tom answered grimly, and told quickly how the old T Bar owner had cashed his chips. "But the sheriff is alive, all right," he finished. "He's wounded, but plenty able t' understand."

"Then come on!" Lefty Fletcher urged. "We got t' git Taylor's body out o' this cabin. An' we got t' pack that wounded sheriff off some place. If we don't hurry—"

Fletcher broke off sharply. From out toward the barn came a rabble of voices and the clinking of spur rowels.

"They're comin'!" Lefty Fletcher hissed. "Damn it, we wasted too much time talkin', Bercham. If yuh had—"

"Come on!" Tom ripped out, and shoved the man toward the door. "Steady, Sheriff!" Tom called softly. "A friend an' me are comin' in. No time t' crawl like I promised."

"Yuh all right, son?" the sheriff said anxiously.

"Shore, I'm all right," Tom clipped. "But we've got t' hurry, Sheriff. Lefty Fletcher is with me, an' he's got some evidence t' offer—evidence that'll hang Buck Leslie shore as shootin'!"

"Not so loud!" Fletcher whispered. "Two men are watchin' the front. Where's Taylor's body? I'll take it, an' you bring the sheriff."

Sheriff Jerome had been nipping steadily at the bottle. He was perhaps a little tipsy, but the alcohol had dulled the throbbing of his wound, and he could walk without undue difficulty, Tom observed. He leaped to help Lefty Fletcher, who was grunting under the dead weight of Roy Taylor's body.

"Grab his shoulders, Fletcher," Tom snapped. "I've got his feet. An' hurry, man. Hear that?"

Fletcher and the sheriff both heard the dry rattle of brush being stacked against the front wall of the cabin. And they heard, too, Buck

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Leslie's voice lifted in a wild, triumphant shout.

"Now stick a match in that stuff, boys, an' scatter around the cabin!" Leslie yelled. "A star-packin' sheriff an' Tom Bercham will come foggin' out when things git too hot fer 'em. Remember, boys, the idea is t' kill them two snakes—an' whoever the third gent is, too. Scatter—thar goes the fire!"

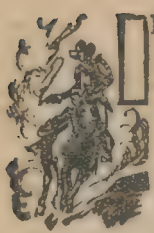
Tom Bercham and Lefty Fletcher moved as fast as they could toward that back door, burdened as they were with Roy Taylor's limp body. Rigor mortis had not set in as yet, and Taylor's body sagged and rolled, making it hard to handle.

A snarl of uneasiness bubbled in Tom Bercham's throat. Boots were pounding loudly outside the cabin walls.

"We'll never make it!" Lefty Fletcher croaked. "Hell, Bercham, they got us!"

CHAPTER XI

Showdown



IN later years, when Tom Bercham was wont to recall the events of that peril-fraught night, he could never remember what had taken place in those fateful moments which marked the escape from that doomed cabin. For instinct alone—blind, courageous, all-compelling—guided him that night.

Buck Leslie's killers were still gathered at the front wall of the cabin, ready to scatter in a murderous circle around the doomed building. And in that moment when they were still staring evilly at the huge pile of brush that would shortly flare up in consuming flames, Tom Bercham cautiously opened the back door of the cabin.

The jaspers who had been watching there had left their post to help pile up the brush pyre. "Follow me! Don't make a sound!" Tom hissed at the sheriff and Lefty Fletcher; and, with Taylor's limp body in their arms, Tom and Fletcher bolted on tiptoe out the door, Sheriff Jerome trailing directly behind.

They made for the thick brush ahead. Panting with the desperate effort, the three men pushed headlong into the bushes. They were escaping, after all—

"Steady, son," old Sheriff Jerome was saying thickly. "You an' Lefty Fletcher kin lay pore Roy down now, I reckon. Looks like we got past them sons—but I don't see how." He shook his head.

Tom heard a shaky laugh, and turned to stare at Lefty Fletcher. They lowered the limp body to the cool earth, then stood staring back toward the cabin.

"Better take Taylor's body on into the brush yonder," Fletcher said hoarsely. "When that cabin flares up this spot will show up plain."

Without a word, Tom Bercham stooped, gathered the dead man's feet once more. Lefty Fletcher grasped the limp shoulders, and a few moments later the body of Roy Taylor lay well hidden beneath gnarled cedar bushes.

"Seems a mite strange fer a T Bar man t' be helpin' us," Sheriff Jerome drawled thinly. "Fletcher, jest what's the idea?"

"The idea," Lefty Fletcher snarled, "is that I want t' see Buck Leslie hung. He murdered Ed Bean last night, jest 'cause he wanted it t' look bad fer Bercham's outfit. Ed an' me come up the trail from Oklahoma together, Sheriff," he said simply.

"Uh-huh—with a couple dozen posses on yore tails," the officer grunted. "That right?"

"Ed an' me was on the losin' side of a range ruckus down thar in the Osage country," Lefty Fletcher said stiffly. "When our side lost, we was wonderin' which way t' jump, when along comes Frog Spellman an' says as how thar's a gun job apiece fer Ed an' me out here in Arizona territory."

"Shore, Buck Leslie *would* be scoutin' around all the range wars he could hear of t' pick up gunmen," the sheriff gritted. "But go on, Fletcher."

"Ed an' me come along, since we was busted an' needed a change o' climate," Lefty Fletcher resumed. "But we was aimin' t' pull out in a month or so longer, fer we didn't like the kind o' gents we was herded with. Ed Bean an' me never drilled a man that didn't have it comin', regardless o' what is charged up agin us."

LEFTY told quickly then of having overheard Leslie bragging about how he had shot Ed Bean in the back the night before, and run off the cattle Ed had been guarding.

"The son took a bunch o' Block B stuff last night, too," Lefty finished hotly. "He drove both bunches down the main trails, so's Frank Bercham an' Roy Taylor would meet up at the forks o' the trail this mornin' an' shoot it out. An' he sent that Flint buzzard along, with orders t' kill them two old men in case they didn't kill each other."

"Thanks, Fletcher," the sheriff said quietly. "An' now, young feller, I'll hand yuh some good news. I had a letter from a sheriff down Oklahoma way a day or so ago. Among other things, that sheriff says t' tell a coupla young gents named Ed Bean an' Lefty Fletcher that a certain mess has been cleared up, an' that the law ain't interested in hangin' their hides on the fence, so far as he is concerned."

"I wish Ed could—hear that," Lefty Fletcher choked. "Ed took it hard when the law blamed us fer tryin' to protect what was ours."

"Yuh mean you boys was fightin' to save yore own stuff?" the sheriff asked sharply.

"We was!" Lefty Fletcher snapped bitterly. "Ed an' me had us a little spread up in the Bird Creek country an' was doin' right well until a grass hog tried crowdin' us out. He done it eventually. But some o' his hired gun-slingers got turned into buzzard bait, even if Ed an' me did have t' sell our stock an' bust down the blackjacks gittin' out o' thar."

"Then I reckon yuh'll be goin' back, son, now that Mr. Range-hog has been found out an' yore name is cleared," the sheriff said slowly. "I'll want yuh t' stay here, in case we can manage t' git our hands on Buck Leslie fer a trial."

"Nope, I won't go back down thar," Lefty Fletcher said wearily. "I'll drift, I reckon, fer it's a cinch no owner with brains would hire me after I got drenched with skunk oil by workin' fer Buck Leslie. I'll ride—"

"This ain't no time t' be makin' a gent a promise, Lefty," Tom Bercham cut in. "But jest in case we come through this mix-up alive, fella, thar's a bunk at the Block B fer you. I'll be needin' men I can trust—"

"Thanks!" Lefty Fletcher said, a lump in his throat. He poked out his hand, and Tom Bercham gripped it briefly, firmly. Then the three men turned their eyes to the blazing cabin, where dark figures scurried about.

"Long odds, but mebbe we'll come through," Sheriff Jerome said grimly. "You two young uns 'swing off t' right and left flank, since yuh're a mite more active than me. I'll come straight in. Every time yuh bust a cap, make shore yore bead is on a man target. Surprise will help us some, boys, but—"

"Shore, surprise is the best thing we can think up," Tom Bercham put in quickly. "An' what do yuh think o' this?" He talked rapidly for a full minute, while the sheriff and Lefty Fletcher listened attentively.

The glow of the burning cabin was tinting their tense faces now, lighting them redly. Lefty Fletcher's lean-jawed face was pale, grimly set. His hard grey eyes shone hotly through slitted lids as he glanced at the men who ran excitedly about the burning cabin.

"By gosh, son, that's a trick worth tryin'!" the sheriff approved when Tom had finished talking. "Yuh want Lefty an 'me t' answer back when yuh yell, eh?"

Tom nodded jerkily. "That's the ticket! An' it's time t' git goin'. If it works, we'll be ahead. If it don't, we'll be no worse off than we are right now."

He moved away through the brush then, circling to the left of the burning cabin. He glanced back once, and saw Lefty Fletcher stalking off to the right flank, while old Sheriff Cal Jerome sat balancing a six-gun in his left hand.

Tom Bercham moved in as close to the burning cabin as he dared without exposing himself, then settled down to wait a few minutes. He could hear the voices of the bushwackers now. And as he watched them he saw Buck Leslie come slogging from a brush patch to stand with drawn guns.

"The damned fools are aimin' t' roast alive, are they?" Buck Leslie's voice carried plainly to Tom. "I was hopin' they'd come boilin' out so's I could plug that Tom Bercham myself."

"Them log walls is thick, Buck," a whining voice shrilled; and Tom saw Frog Spellman lurch into view from behind another bush to stand watching the cabin.

"NO heat will penetrate them walls fer a long time," the vicious little gunman went on. "But we got time t' wait, ain't we?"

"Time?" Buck Leslie laughed nastily. "Hell, Frog, we got all night if we want t' take it!"

"Good thing I was slow gittin' started from town, an' happened t' see Bercham headin' off through that rocky hill country, after you fellers had already rode on," Spellman said.

"Gosh, you gents shore was headin' fer the Border. But thanks t' me, we got Bercham where we want him. Ain't that right, Buck?" The runty little killer was obviously trying hard to win praise from his boss.

Tom Bercham was ready now to try his trick. He backed into deep shadows, and cupped his hands to his mouth. There were at least a dozen men there about the burning cabin, and Tom saw that most of them were at the back, evidently thinking their quarry would come out on the opposite side from where the fire had been started. Tom drew a deep breath, then—

"Hi, Sheriff!" he bawled at the top of his lungs. "Take yore men an' go around to the west side of the cabin! We got the other three sides covered, but them snakes could git away if they was to run west on us. Hurry, Sheriff!"

Buck Leslie's heartless killers became still black dots against the glowing blaze. Tom saw Frog Spellman and Buck Leslie jerk around, heard their frightened oaths as they dived back into the brush from which they had come. Then the sheriff's voice came in answer, and after that Lefty Fletcher's loud hail.

"We'll git around to the west fast as we can, Tom!" the sheriff roared. "Hell, why didn't we think o' that sooner?"

There was a milling of men there about the burning cabin. Four of the hombres poured bullets into the night, firing out of sheer alarm. Then a long-legged jasper broke swiftly away from the fire, yelling something as he headed past the cabin and straight west. Others followed. Buck Leslie's hirelings were stampeding away, yelling crazily as their fear mounted.

"Stop!" Leslie screamed in rage. "Come back here, yuh fools! There's only three o' them fellers. It's a trick. Stop, damn yuh!"

THREE men had to; Buck Leslie headed them off, and leveled his twin guns at them. But the others ran on into the night, and Tom Bercham heard the snorting of frightened horses from somewhere west of the burning cabin as he leaped from the brush and into the clearing.

He was halfway to the pyre when Frog Spellman leaped sideward, firing from either hip as he moved. Tom felt a bullet cut the slack in his left trouser leg, and answered the grimy little killer's fire. Spellman rocked back on his heels, sent two slugs into the sky, and fell limply against Buck Leslie.

Leslie squalled an oath, kicked savagely at his dead confederate, and leaped clear. His gun spewed, and Tom Bercham felt as if the whole

side of his face had been blown away. He struck the ground on one side, rolled over, and tried to crawl back to his feet.

Blood smeared his face, and there was a numbness creeping over his brain. He felt another slug slap him high in the neck, and flopped face down in dust that had been churned up by the maddened T Bar gunman.

Tom lay there a moment, fighting the pain and shock that threatened to daze and blind him. He heard oaths, screams of pain, and the steady hammering of guns. The sheriff and Lefty Fletcher were there, he knew. And he had to help them. He forced himself up to hands and knees, then got shakily to his feet.

Tom grinned through the sweat and blood and dirt that smeared his face, for the grim old sheriff and Lefty Fletcher were closing in, swapping shots with the three hombres Buck Leslie had halted.

Then Tom Bercham saw Buck Leslie coming at him. Leslie's fat face was a twisted mask of insane rage. In the firelight his pale little eyes looked blood-red, and there was a trickle of saliva drooling from the corners of his wide mouth.

"Tom Bercham, I'm killin' yuh here an' now!" Leslie squalled. "No damned shorthorn kin fool with me an' git by with it. I'm killin' yuh! Hear?"

"I hear yuh, skunk!" Tom Bercham yelled, blinking blood and dirt from his eyes. "But I think yuh're due fer a hangin', yuh murderin' polecat!"

Tom shifted, for he had seen Buck Leslie thumbing gun hammers. Leslie's guns roared, and Tom felt the searing pain of a bullet that singed his thigh. Then his own .45 split thunder at the rage-maddened Buck Leslie. The range coyote shivered, spun half around, and sank to the dirt, face down.

Sheriff Cal Jerome came running up, smoking Colt waving in his left hand. "Hell, man, I thought yuh never would drop the snake," he panted. "Why in hell did yuh wait so long? Lefty an' me damned near died o' heart failure watchin' it!"

"I waited," Tom said grimly, "'cause I wanted t' be shore of where I put my lead. Buck Leslie needs hangin' instead of a hot lead ticket t' hell!"

"But yuh might've got kilt doin' such a fool thing!" the sheriff snapped. "Lefty is hog-tyin' the one o' them three fools that lived after tanglin' with me an' him. We—What the hell!"

BERCHAM bent at the knees, tried to right himself. His head sank, and he would have fallen but for the lean left arm of Sheriff Jerome. Lefty Fletcher came racing up, helped lower Tom to the ground. The sheriff bent quickly over him, examining his wounds.

"Is—is he done fer, Sheriff?" Lefty Fletcher asked, haltingly.

"Nope, I don't see a wound that looks even half fatal." The sheriff laughed a little shakily. "An' when Tom comes out of it, I'll give him a cussin' for not killin' Buck Leslie sooner than he did. Tom tried to save that hellion fer the noose."

"I wondered why he waited ontil Buck Leslie was practically a-straddle o' him," Lefty Fletcher said. "It'd be jest my luck t' have the only man in the country that'd give me a job git kilt."

"Which reminds me." The sheriff grinned suddenly up at Lefty. "You will likely git a foreman's job instead of a regular cowpoke's job. Yuh see, Lefty, Roy Taylor sent fer Lawyer Wilson this mornin' while he was at the doctor's office.

"Roy knowed how his nephew had framed this trouble between the T Bar and the Block B. So he makes out a new will—an' Tom Bercham owns both spreads now!"

"Yuh—yuh reckon Tom would take me on as foreman?" Lefty Fletcher asked eagerly. "But what about Bat Upton?"

"Bat'll be busy enough runnin' the Block B," the sheriff answered. "That'll leave an openin' fer a foreman's job at the T Bar, an' I'll bet

dollars t' doughnuts that yuh draw the job. Yuh didn't do yoreself any hurt when yuh come out o' the skunk herd tonight an' throwed in with Tom Bercham. He—*look out!*"

From the tail of his eye the old officer saw a stealthy movement. He spun just in time to see Buck Leslie jerk up to a sitting position, a gun clutched in one fat fist!

But Leslie was too dazed to realize that he had a gun, that he might have taken a shot at the sheriff or Lefty Fletcher. Blood streamed down his fleshy face, blinding his evil eyes.

"Yuh would, hey?" Lefty Fletcher snarled, and swung a booted foot that crashed into Leslie's jaw.

BUCK Leslie flopped backward, out cold from the blow. Lefty bent over him, picked up the gun and tossed it away.

"Scalp creased plumb down the middle," Lefty called. "Sheriff, this fat son will hang after all."

"That's why I waited ontil I could be shore where I put a bullet," Tom Bercham called, and grinned through the blood and dirt on his face as the sheriff and Lefty jumped in alarm at the sound of his voice coming from behind them.

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE:

THE ONE-SHOT KID

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Author of "Trigger-Man Todd," "Colt Creed," etc.

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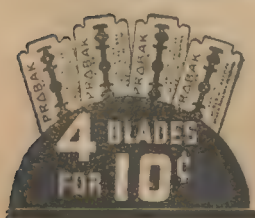


PROBAK JUNIOR

DEAD MAN'S LEAD

A Scrappy Pair Withstands the Murderous Siege of the Crawling E Rangehogs!

By
FRANK CARL YOUNG

Author of "After Sundown," "Crippled Guns," etc.

THIN slashes of yellow speared through the creamy moonlight from the purpled slopes above Tex Warner's little ranchhouse. The staccato crackle of Leo Ewing's Crawling E rifles interlaced the blanket of night-silence that had enveloped the headquarters of Opal Creek. From the tiny house in the basin spikes of flame occasionally darted from one of the windows.

Inside the pit-darkness of his recently purchased ranchhouse, Tex Warner slithered from window to door and back again. His Winchester snorted defiance at every flash on the slope. Scurrying around the room with him, his rifle hot and anxious, was boyish, tight-lipped Al Burns, Tex's only cowhand.

"We can't take this batterin' much longer, boss!" he choked, flattening himself beside Tex and feeding the Winchester fresh shells. "A dozen cartridges ain't gonna take me far. Yuh got any more?"

"No!" came the bitter reply.

Al shook his head. "Ewing was right when he said he would blast

A strip of flame lanced towards Goff's form

yuh out of this end of the valley. I'm afraid we're through, boss."

Tex pressed his cheek against the door-frame. His blue eyes gleamed like burnished nuggets as they narrowed and fought to pierce the moonlight and the blackness of the slope across the creek. But nothing stirred.

Like a frustrated lion, he shook his tall frame and scraped it along the side wall until he reached the window. Again his pinched eyes stabbed futilely through the night for visible movement. When a slug bored through the wall close to his ear, he cursed.

"Bushwhackin' cur!" he growled, hurrying to the rear door to avert any possible charge from that direction. "He owns the whole damn valley but this small quarter section, an' still he ain't satisfied! Wal, if Ewing thinks he kin gun me off this chunk o' land Ben Ash sold me, he's crazy! I'm figgerin' on some fancy gunnin' m'self right now!"

As a hail of lead spattered against the walls, Tex squirmed back to Burns.

"Listen, kid, I'm headin' fer the corral," he said, his hand resting on the cold, nervous one of the other. "The only way to stop this range-hog is to tear him apart with lead. Now you stick here fer a spell to cover me up an' keep 'em thinkin' there's still two of us."

Burns' hand wrapped itself viciously around Tex's arm. "Hell, boss, yuh'll git killed out there!" he gulped. "Yuh couldn't pick him out anyway. Any one of them rifle flashes might be his gun, but how yuh gonna tell which one! Mebbe he ain't even out there—jest his men!"

"I ain't a fool, Al," Tex told him, as he dumped additional cartridges on the floor. "I'm headin' fer Ewing's ranchhouse. It's only three miles. With all his men up here, I'll have a chance to burn it an' bring him hell-bent away from here. If he's down there, mebbe I kin git him, too! Now stick here fer ten minutes, then follow me—"

A slug screamed through the open window. Burns suddenly jerked. His fingernails dug deep into Tex's arm, then relaxed. Slumping heavily against the young rancher, his head rolled sidewise, rested on Tex's shoulder.

"Al— Al, yuh're hit!"

The kid's chilling lips stirred, and formed syllables. His dimming eyes still reflecting admiration for his wild, daring boss, Burns mumbled:

"Stick an extra slug in him fer me, will yuh, boss—"

Tex's first emotion was to hurl himself outside and open up on the slope in general with both guns. For six months he had anticipated the years that he and Al might spend together. He had even considered making Al his partner.

Instead, he carefully placed his only cowhand in the safest corner and then stacked the table and chairs around him.

Like fireflies, the guns on the slope continued their grim job. Whining lead ceased to scream as it thudded into the frame walls. But no one inside Tex Warner's ranchhouse heard.

FOR Tex was now wriggling through the deep grass toward the corral, his eyes concentrated on the deep-chested bay that wouldn't feel a saddle as it carried him swiftly toward the big ranchhouse of the mighty Crawling E spread.

"I won't forget, Al," he murmured, as he reached through the grass and finally touched the fence post.

The corral was bathed white with moonlight. It seemed too bright for Tex. He would stand out like an olive on a plate should he attempt to cross it to the bay, which fidgeted nervously on the far side.

His fingers went to his lips. Whistling softly, his lengthy frame hidden in the deep grass, Tex waited. Slowly, entirely too slowly, the bay edged suspiciously toward him.

When at last the big form loomed beside him, Tex slowly stood up and entwined his fingers in the long mane. Gently prodding the bay with his other hand, he maneuvered across the open corral to the pole

gate. Still using the bay for a screen, he breathlessly removed the bars, then sprang to the broad, naked back.

"Now leap to it!" he yelped, burying the spurs.

Like a crazed comet, the bay bolted forward. Pressed flat to its back, Tex was whirled beneath the low branches of the two cottonwoods between the corral and the barn.

Crack!

Like a burst balloon, the bay collapsed and kneed into the dusty lane. Tex shot over the animal's neck and thudded to his back ten feet farther on.

Dazed, he quickly twisted on his side and glanced back. Standing wide-legged in the middle of the lane just opposite one of the cottonwoods, was a gigantic figure that couldn't be mistaken. It was Hank Goff, the strongest man on the Crawling E outfit.

"Don't git up, Warner—yuh'll only be layin' down again in a second!" rumbled Goff, and Tex caught the bright glint of moonlight on the barrel of his naked Colt.

As the huge form grimly rocked toward him, Tex remembered Al Burns back in the house. Something snagged in him as he thought of that lifeless, huddled form. Stealthily, he curled his leg to rise.

"Yuh ain't got the lead fer me, Goff!" he cried, leaping to his feet, his hands pawing for his sides, only to find that his guns had been shaken from their holsters by his spine-thumping fall.

He was helpless in the face of spewing lead. A sheet of ice seemed suddenly slammed against his spine. He stiffened and glared expectantly, wildly at Goff's leveling Colt. Death was a split second away—

Suddenly from the doorway of the barn a stripe of flame lanced toward Goff's hulking form. Mingled with the roar of the hidden gun was the mortal scream of the Crawling E waddie. As though clubbed with a bludgeon, Goff sank to the ground and lay still.

"Come in here—quick!" came a voice from the barn. The voice was sharp, commanding. It was even insistent.

Knowing there was on other recourse, Tex obeyed. He stared at the black aperture that was the barn doorway with wide, puzzled eyes. He wondered what new menace lurked inside with drawn gun.

As the blackness dropped like a sheath over him, he felt a firm hand grasp his arm. Pivoting like a spun top, he found himself facing a middle-sized figure. A pole of moonlight that had bored its way into the barn through a knothole, revealed a lean, high-cheekboned face with calm, expressive eyes and a straight, full nose. But the mouth was tight, a little twisted.

"Jedgin' from yore situation right now, I figger yuh're Tex Warner," said the stranger abruptly. "I'm Ches Laird. Ben Ash, the gent yuh bought this spread from, sent me."

"Know Ash?" queried Tex instantly, figuring that if Ash sent him he had nothing to fear.

"Pretty well," replied the other. "But what were yuh aimin' to do when yuh stuck yore hide on that bay's back? Lam out of here fer good, or what?"

IT wasn't a policy of Tex's to spread his affairs around the world. Close-lipped, though reckless, he found that he always fared better by letting everyone figure things out themselves. But this time it was a gent who had just saved his life who was doing the prying.

"I ain't fergittin' yuh jest cheated hell out o' my skin, Laird," he answered carefully. "But first off I would kind of like to know why Ash sent yuh up here."

Above the continued rifle fire from the slopes, Tex heard a scornful laugh. It chilled him, and he glanced quickly at the moon-spotted face before him. It seemed like an ugly gargoyle right now.

"Hell, I bought this ranch from him two days ago!"

"Yuh what!" gasped Tex, his calculating mind churning madly for a quick solution. "Listen, Laird, if this is a joke, save it. I'm headin' fer

Leo Ewing's ranch on a particular job that's got to be finished tonight. I ain't got any time to listen to funny yarns—"

"Yuh ain't gonna figger this as a joke," Laird replied grimly, the laughter quickly dying. Before Tex could take another breath, the cold muzzle of a Colt was jammed in his stomach. "I plunked ten thousand cash on Ben Ash's desk this mornin' after seein' this ranch a week ago. Ash told me then that yuh'd be pullin' out in a week. He said that Ewing would take care of that end. Now I'm personally gonna see that the job is finished. I want this ranch —bad!"

Tex quivered with fury. He had believed that Laird was a friend. Instead, he was directly responsible for the assault on his ranch. Because of him, Al Burns had been killed. Al Burns who might have become his partner.

"What a bout Goff?" he asked for it was surprising that Laird should save his life, yet now threaten him.

"That rat stepped on my toe in Ash's once last week," answered Laird, his lips curling back over his teeth. "He had it comin'."

Tex froze. He knew he could expect little mercy from a gent who would kill for such a trifling thing. What fiendish method would he devise to finish the job that apparently Ash and Ewing hadn't completed—yet.

As he looked down at the steady gun jammed against his side, Laird suddenly cocked his head and then glanced through the barn doorway.

"It's about time they got the nerve to come down!" he brayed. Pushing Tex outside, Laird followed and stood beside him.

FROM all directions Tex heard the crash of plunging hoofs as the Crawling E riders left their points of ambush and charged for the small ranchhouse, their blazing guns striping the moonlight.

Tex knew that he had no chance at all to save his ranch now. He was swamped. The devilish plan worked on him was perfect. He saw it clearly now. Ash and Ewing were in cahoots. Ash did the selling, and Ewing the cleaning off so that another buyer could be sucked in and eventually blasted off. A slick game without a chance to lose.

Like hungry hawks, Ewing's riders swooped down on the ranch yard. Pounding past the corral, one of them spied Goff's sprawled figure and slid to a halt. Dismounting, he glanced around suspiciously, then saw Tex and Laird standing stiffly beside the barn. His gun suddenly tilted.

"Take it easy. This is Laird!" warned the voice of the man behind Tex.

As the rider cautiously strode forward, Tex saw the others halt, turn and hurry in their direction. A moment later he was completely surrounded by Ewing's entire crew. And among them was Leo Ewing and Ben Ash.

Tex's eyes narrowed with hatred and bitterness as he watched the two contrasting figures dismount and crunch toward him. Ewing's huge hulk made Ash's spare figure seem even more gangling than it was. In the moonlight, he could see the sneering grin that twisted the big rancher's pouchy features. Ewing hated him. Ash's town-whitened brow was knotted with worry. It seemed that Laird's presence was making him feel not any too good.

Tex glared at Ash. He had had confidence in him in the past. Now he was seeing him in his true colors —a shifty, conniving money-fox that drove a bargain to pay two ways. With an oath, he recklessly rushed in to close with the lean figure.

But before he could clutch that white throat, Ewing's malletlike fist shot out. It thudded on Tex's chin. As he stumbled back, Laird grabbed him by the collar and poked his gun in his back.

"Try that again, an' I'll skewer yuh with hot lead!"

Tex knew he was helpless. That he might battle his way clear of ten men was an impossibility. That he would never see another dawn was a surety. His hand had been played

to the last card. He was through—nearly.

Laird addressed himself to Ash, his face knotted with anger. "What about it, you? I come expectin' to take over this place tonight, an' what do I find? Or does it take fifty of yuh to do what any good man could do in ten minutes?"

Ewing and Ash glanced speculatively at each other. It was plain that they were thinking of the ten thousand cash Laird had laid on Ash's desk that morning. If they didn't come through, they'd lose it.

"I'll attend to it m'self," announced Ewing. "I never needed any more than m'self at any time to do anything I ever wanted to do, Laird. Yuh might keep that in yore bonnet fer future use!"

"Wal, git to it!"

With that Ewing turned to his men and ordered them back to the Crawling E bunkhouse. When they had gone, he grabbed Tex and shoved him toward the house. Ash and Laird followed.

"WAL, what's the play, Ewing?" demanded Laird, when they were inside the small room where half an hour ago Tex had lain with Al in the shadows. "Yuh'll have to make it good to keep this kid's mouth closed. An' I don't want to take any chances on a possible investigation turning up later."

As Ewing lit the lamp swinging from the center beam, Tex caught the expression on the bloated face. He read grimness and the suggestion of heinousness. Then Ewing hurled the burnt match away and turned toward Laird who leaned against the wall, his gun still naked and leveled on Tex.

"Do yuh think burnin' the place will suit yore fussy mind, Laird?" grinned Ewing, as though it pleased him to have thought up such a fiendish plan. "Warner won't ever talk either, 'cause he's gonna be right inside when it's burnin'—"

"Look here!"

Ash, who had been stirring around the place, suddenly gasped. He was standing hunched over the piled chairs and table in the corner where Tex had placed Burns' body. Ewing hurried to his side, then laughed.

"Wal, we won't have to tie him up," he gurgled. "He's deader'n hell!"

A lump welled in Tex's throat when he saw Ewing pull the chairs and table away from Burns' huddled form. He was glad Al wasn't alive to witness the fire. He had liked the place too much for that. He would have gone mad with rage—and then died anyway.

The same as he was going to.

Worry shrouded Ben Ash's features, made him seem years older. Suddenly he stooped and took off Burns' boots and stood them under the bed in the next room. When he returned and commanded Tex to take his off, Ewing cursed and demanded violently:

"What in hell's the matter with yuh, anyway?"

"It's gotta look real—as if they were caught while sleepin'. Yuh don't figger the sheriff's gonna be that dumb that he'll think two healthy hombres with their boots on would hang around inside a burnin' shack, do yuh?"

Ewing smiled and scratched his head. Laird chuckled and lit a cigarette, then swore.

"The gent's got brains."

Tex had no desire to talk. It would have been useless. Besides, he was constantly trying to devise some means of escape. But he could find no way out. It was too positive a condition.

Ewing wasted no time. He took short lengths of cord from a box in the corner and tied Tex's wrists and ankles. Knocking him to the floor, he hurled the lamp into another corner. As the spilled kerosene leaped into flames, he beckoned to Laird and Ash.

"We kin watch it from outside an' make shore it's a good job."

The crackling flames in the corner worked fast. Tex twisted and writhed as the increasing heat tortured his skin. The veins bulged on his forehead as he strained to break the cords binding his wrists. But

Ewing hadn't been a fool. They were tight and strong.

Through the open doorway he could see the three of them stoically watching the flames mount higher. They stood about thirty feet away from the house, their faces illuminated by the reflection through the window and door. They were grinning.

"Oh, Gawd!" moaned Tex, as he started to squirm toward the door, only to be brought up short as he suddenly realized that Ewing had fastened him to the bedroom door with another piece of tripled cord.

The blistering heat swarmed over him. His skin tightened like a drum. His lungs ached, tortured him with desire for cool breath.

He lay back gasping, his glaring eyes riveted to hungry, relentless flames that lashed out toward him. Hope fled from him and he wondered dully if he would lose consciousness before he died.

"Tex!"

His jaw sagged. That voice! He swore that he was imagining things. Maybe already he was dead. He must be hearing—

"Tex!"

He swore, then turned on his side. That voice, so soft, so feeble. It couldn't be any other, except—

"Al!" he cried, as his burning eyes rested on the huddle in the corner. "Al—Al, I thought that you—"

The light from the flames revealed a slight movement of Burns' leg. Then Tex saw the curly-haired head lift, saw the pain-reddened eyes blink, plead.

"So—so did I, Tex. B-but I ain't got much s-strength left— Come closer—"

Tears trickled down Tex's face. But it wasn't the heat that brought them. The very thought that Al still possessed a spark of life touched a hidden cord in his heart.

A flood of new strength surged through him. Wriggling forward, he gained inch upon inch on the gap between them. When at last he was within reaching distance, Al Burns stirred slowly and produced a pocketknife.

Stark terror whitened Tex's eyes as he watched the yellow flames leap closer. If only Al had the strength to cut through those cords in time. How slow and feeble was the pressure of the sawing knife. Would he never get through!

"Tex, I can't go on—"

He felt the pressure leave the cords on his wrists. Al fell back in a faint. Madness tore at Tex's mind. With a vicious wrench, he twisted his wrists.

To his surprise, he heard a ripping, tearing sound, then a snap. The weakened cords had parted! He was free!

Plucking the knife from Al's fingers, he quickly freed his ankles. For a precious moment, he rubbed blood back into his numb limbs. Then cautiously, he peered beyond the door.

Ewing, Ash and Laird still stood out there!

RUSHING to the corner, he carefully scooped up Al's limp figure and ran for the back door. Outside he gently laid him beneath a tree and sucked the cool, life-giving night breeze into his own pain-soaked lungs.

Then he stooped and unbuckled the gun belt from around Al's waist.

Strapping it on, he pulled the guns and examined them. Then, like a preying fox, he crept in a wide circle around his flaming ranchhouse toward the front of it. He knew there would be three figures standing there. Three figures he wanted to meet—bad.

A moment before their faces had been lighted with complete satisfaction. Now incredulity and amazement were suddenly stamped in their eyes and features. Shock caused them to flop open their mouths and jerk back.

"Hell, it can't be!" yelled Ewing, paler now than Ben Ash had ever been. "I—why that cord was too—"

Laird's eyes glittered like a striking snake's. His body became rigid as stone. Ash gulped several times, passed his fingers over his throat. Then half crazed with terror, he clawed for his shoulder holster.

Tex stood twenty feet away beneath a cottonwood. His stockinged feet dug into the cool, dewy ground. His gleaming stare was level, penetrating like a steel auger. Ash's swift movement hadn't passed unnoticed.

"Now yuh swine, taste this—"

From his left hip speared a stripe of flame. Ash coughed and doubled. Then Laird and Ewing simultaneously dug for their irons.

Tex laughed shrilly. It was nothing to face their spewing guns after being hopelessly trapped inside that raging furnace. With calm deliberateness, he crooked his trigger finger.

"Here's a slug from Al Burns—a dead man!" he laughed, as his gun bucked.

A hot spike seemed to be suddenly driven into his side. It twisted him sidewise for a moment, cramped him. But the pain of it was lost in the pleasure of seeing Ewing crash to the ground.

"This is personally from me!" he screamed, as Laird paused for careful aim.

The tongues of flame from the two guns nearly met. A strange, surprised expression tore at Laird's features. His eyes were wide, but they didn't see. Then he fell.

AFTER painfully hitching his two remaining mounts to the buckboard in the barn, Tex stumbled to where he had left Al beneath the cottonwood. Picking up the barely conscious figure, he staggered to the wagon and gently laid it down.

As he covered Al with a blanket from the barn, he pressed his hand lightly on the other's shoulder, then faced the glowing embers that had once been a ranchhouse. In his eyes there was a reflected warmth, an expression of joyful anticipation, as if he was looking into the future. When he felt Al's hand on his own, his lips stirred:

"We'll build her up again—jest you an' I, pardner."

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

HOW MANY o' yuh rannies kin cal'late th' right savvies t' these five questions? If yuh can't answer pronto, turn t' page 74 fer the plumb proper replies—but DON'T RUSTLE THE ANSWERS NOW!

1. What species of Western critter kills rats, mice, rabbits, and likes to claw a steak out of some unsuspecting human? It has a very valuable pelt.

2. What famous outlaw married Jane Bowen, frequently referred to as Queen of the Panhandle?

3. Why was the cemetery in the historical Dodge City called Boot Hill?

4. What is one range remedy for warts?

5. When they say a waddy is "singin' in a coyote key," what is meant?

RED JUSTICE

'Till Larry Neale and Kepnau Barged Into Screeching Hordes of Border-raiding Yaquis, Ranches Blazed in Fiery Pyres Against the Brooding Skies!

By A. LESLIE

Author of "When the Red Man Rode," "The Arizona Ranger," etc.

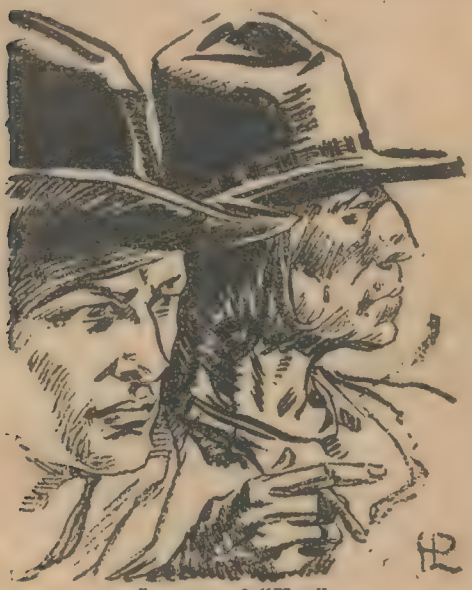
CHAPTER I

The Raiders

"NOPE, I ain't hirin' no Injuns."

Old John Turner, owner of the big Bar W, shook his grey head decisively.

"But, Uncle John," pleaded Larry Neale, "Kep is a top-hand, and he's a square shooter all the way through."



Larry and "Kep"

Turner shook his head again. "Nope, I don't want him. I wouldn't hire a Injun under any circumstances. I ain't got no use for any of 'em. You can have a job any time you want it, Larry, but no Injuns."

Larry Neale gathered up his reins. "All right," he said, "we'll be ridin."

"Better light and eat fust," said Turner, "it's a long an' dusty jaunt to town."

The tall young cowboy shook his black head. "Nope," he said, turning his horse toward where the stocky, hawk-faced Sioux sat in his saddle like a bronze statue. "I cain't eat with a man who wouldn't hire my pardner. So long, Uncle John; sorry you ain't acceptin' my proposition!"

Stiff of back, the two young men rode away. Old John Turner stroked his white beard, grumbling to himself the while.

"Best man with a hoss, rope or gun in the whole darn Territory of Arizona! Now *why* does he hafta go and take up with a red Injun? Injuns ain't no good, none of 'em. Damn Yaquis has been raidin' in this section for the past month. Apaches were bad enough.

"Now Yaquis from outa Mexico! That hellion with Neale looked sorta like one—ain't no Apache, that's sartain; not with that face and

A Novelette of Indian-Fighting Days

Larry's twin Colts blazed away

nose. Apaches is broad-faced and their noses ain't no eagle beaks!"

Still grumbling, old John stomped into the ranchhouse. Larry Neale and Kepnau rounded a bend and jingled along a well traveled trail.

"Looks like I sorta missed my throw," said Larry ruefully. "I was plumb shore Uncle John'd give us both somethin' to do. Well, if he won't, somebody else will. Plenty of spreads in this here section."

Kepnau's dark eyes were troubled. "I fear my brother has taken my pack upon his shoulders also," he said, "and its weight may bear him down. Cattlemen in this land are not friendly to my people, and they don't seem to understand that there can be good Indians as well as bad ones."

"That's because they ain't knowed none but the bad ones," replied Larry. "Don't you go botherin' yore head 'bout me, old-timer; we'll make out. 'Member Lafe Richardson didn't want to give you a job scoutin' with me for the wagon train, at fust, but he got t' like you fine 'fore long."

Kepnau nodded, and for several miles they rode in silence. The Sioux suddenly shaded his eyes and gazed intently across the mesa land.

"Cattle," he said tersely, "moving fast." He pointed toward a golden smudge rolling above a distant rise.

"Uh-huh," Larry agreed, "shore looks like it. Couldn't anythin' else kick up so much dust, 'lest it was a troop from one of the army posts."

Kepnau shook his head. "If it were a troop, there would be the glint of arms beneath the dust," he disagreed. "No, it's cattle."

"Who the hell'd be runnin' the fat off steers thataway?" wondered Larry. "Must be crazy!"

"Or in much haste," remarked the Sioux.

Larry Neale's grey eyes narrowed. He had spent most of his life here in the border country, and understood the significance in the Indian's casual comment.

"Uh-huh, headed south," he muttered. "Kep, I got a notion whoever's shovin' them dogies along ain't got no bis'ness with 'em. See that manzanita clump over t' the left? S'pose we hole up in there outa sight and give them hustlin' gents a little once-over as they go by? I got a hunch we kin do it better and more comf'table if they don't see us."

"My brother gives good counsel," nodded the Sioux.

Sheltered by the dense growth of the manzanita, they watched the swiftly approaching herd.

"Five riders; no, six," counted Larry. Kepnau nodded, his eyes intent. Suddenly he grunted gutturally: "Riders not white!"

Larry Neale peered through the screening growth. A minute passed. Another.

"Damned if you ain't right!" he swore at last. "Kep, I gotta hunch."

The Sioux hissed a single fierce word— *"Yaqui!"*

Larry Neale's lean jaw tightened. "You shore?" he asked. "Shore they ain't Apaches?"

As the herd rolled toward them under its golden cloud of dust, Larry realized that the Sioux's uncanny eyes had not deceived him. He, too, saw the fierce hawklike faces above the beaded shirts and fringed breeches such as no Apache ever wore. Absent also were the dingy white turbans and the slanting eagle features.

THE coarse black hair of the riders was cut square across the forehead, and was long upon the shoulders, and unbound. Yaqui raiders from Mexico! Deadly as the rattlesnake, cruel as the wolf, cunning as the fox—how cunning, neither the cowboy nor even the shrewd Sioux scout realized.

There was a seventh member of the band, who rode far ahead and to one side. He spotted Larry and Kepnau, had watched them ride into the manzanita. On a long slant he raced to intercept his fellow raiders, keeping the thicket between him and the hidden watchers.

His keen-eyed companions noted his approach, saw his signals and

interpreted them; but they gave no sign. Straight along the trail they urged the cattle, as if nothing new had happened.

"Kep," whispered Larry, "them dogies has been lifted off somebody's range. It's up to you and me to stop them hellions!"

The Sioux nodded. "Wait until they have passed, and then attack them from the rear," he counseled.

Nearer and nearer thundered the herd, hoofs kicking up spurts of yellow dust, horns clashing, wild eyes rolling, nostrils frothing red. Behind and on either side rode the fierce-eyed Yaquis.

But those on the sides were slowly slackening pace and dropping back along the herd. By the time the van of the cattle was opposite the thicket, all six riders were almost bunched.

Past the thicket thudded the herd. The riders, all six of them, were directly opposite the spot that concealed the watchers.

E-e-eyow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

With a blood-curdling screech, the Yaquis wheeled their shaggy ponies as if on pivots. Straight for the manzanita thicket they charged, yelling and shooting.

For a split-second Larry Neale was paralyzed by the suddenness of the move. A bullet burned his cheek. Another ripped his shirt sleeve. He saw a red streak leap along the side of Kepnau's bronzed neck. Before him was a swooping whirlwind of devilish faces and stringy bodies.

Only for a split-second! As the Yaquis crashed through the outer fringe of the growth, the cowboy's slim hands moved with the speed of a striking snake. They closed on the black butts of his heavy Colts. Blue-barreled death hurtled on its way.

The reports blended in a veritable drumroll of sound. Punctuating the crackling six-guns was the heavier boom of Kepnau's Winchester.

Three saddles were emptied at that first blast of lead. A rifle slug blew the top off a fourth savage's head. Then the remaining two crashed madly through the growth.

A clubbed rifle swept Larry from the saddle. He threw his arms around the gun wielder as he went down and the two hit the ground together, the cowboy half dazed, the Yaqui shrilling a wordless battle cry and slashing wildly with a heavy knife.

Larry took a shallow, ripping cut along his left side, and clamped the sinewy wrist with fingers of steel. Over and over the two rolled, striking, gouging, kneeing.

The Yaqui, supple as a snake and strong, whirled the cowboy over on his back and lunged toward him. Larry wrenched the knife hand with all his strength and turned the knife upward just as the Indian's weight came crashing down.

THERE was a gasping gurgle; a hot flood poured over his hand and arm. The Yaqui flopped convulsively and stiffened out.

Larry bounded to his feet just as Kepnau brought his rifle barrel crashing down upon a beetling skull.

"That settles 'em!" panted the cowboy, picking up his empty guns and stuffing fresh cartridges into the cylinders. "We—"

His right hand moved in a flashing blur of movement and he shot across his left arm. The seventh Yaqui's finger stiffened on the trigger of his leveled rifle, but the slug screeched harmlessly through the tree tops.

"Watch out, Kep!" yelled Larry. Tense, watchful, they crouched amid the growth for many minutes, listening, peering. They saw nothing, heard nothing but the grumbling bellows of the tired cattle which were milling a little ways off and settling down to graze.

They were relaxing with sighs of relief when hoofs thudded sharply nearby. Again they gripped their weapons. "It's somebody ridin' away," whispered the cowboy as the sound receded. "C'mon, pardner!"

They wormed their way through the growth. Pushing aside the last branches, they saw a shaggy pony scudding away to the south. On its back a figure swayed and reeled.

"It's one of them jiggers we

downed fust thing!" exclaimed Larry. "He's hard hit."

Kepnau raised his rifle, but Larry touched the Sioux's arm.

"Let the pore devil go, Kep," he urged. "We knocked over plenty as it is."

Kepnau lowered the rifle, but he shook his head dubiously. "I fear my brother is unwise," he said. "It is not good to let a Yaqui get back to his tribe and report what happened. There will be vengeance."

"Mebbe he'll die 'fore he gets there," Larry said. "Anyhow, the chances is he didn't see for shore who we was or what we looked like."

Both were battered, bloody. Larry had a knife wound that, while it was not dangerous, was painful. There was also a sizeable lump on the side of his head, and he had numerous other bruises and scratches. Kepnau had a bullet creased neck and a few minor cuts.

Nothing to worry about in either case, however, and a little attention with water, handkerchiefs, and strips torn from their shirts put them in pretty good shape.

"Now, let's take a look at them dogies and see if we can figger where they come from," Larry suggested.

THEY rode slowly toward the feeding herd. The cattle eyed them suspiciously but made no move to bolt. Larry peered at the brand.

"Cross-in-a-Box," he deciphered. "I don't know that one, but then I've been away from this section for a coupla years. Lots of new outfits mighta lit here in that time."

"They are in good condition," observed Kepnau. His keen eyes swept the trail that wormed its way northeast across the mesa. "Others come," he grunted.

Together they watched the approaching dust cloud. The glint of sun flashes on gun barrels showed from time to time.

Larry slid his big sixes from their sheaths, glanced at them and leathered them again.

"Don't hurt to be ready, jest in case," he drawled. Kepnau nodded and levered a cartridge into the chamber of his rifle.

On came the riders, five of them. They were traveling fast, but as they approached the herd and the two motionless figures sitting their horses in the shadow of a cottonwood, they slowed down, spreading out fanwise. Larry had chosen his position with care, and he and Kepnau were indistinct to the newcomers, while they themselves were outlined hard and clear in the sunlight.

"Hell!" exclaimed Larry suddenly. "I know that jigger ridin' in front. That's Hal Wallace, town marshal of Concha. What's he doin' way out here twenty miles from town?"

As the group cantered up, Larry rode out of the shadow. "Hi, Wallace," he greeted. "Where yuh headin' for?"

Wallace, a heavy-faced man with little dull eyes, swore a surprised oath. "Where the hell'd you come from?" he growled. "What you doin' with them cattle?"

Larry smiled pleasantly, but his grey eyes were cold.

"Betcha yuh're better at questions than answers, Hal," he drawled. "You allus was."

Wallace jerked his horse to a halt a dozen paces from the cowboy. The others reined in behind him. Wallace leaned forward in his saddle.

"Listen, you," he snarled, thick lips curling away from his yellow teeth, "yuh're answerin the questions I'm askin', and answerin' 'em pronto. Them cattle was lifted this mornin' —by Injuns, somebody said. I see you got a Injun here with you. The law's talkin' to yuh, feller!" he snarled.

"Yuh been 'lected sheriff while I was over East?" Larry asked mildly.

"No, I ain't!" barked Wallace, "but I'm still marshal in Concha!"

Larry nodded soberly. "Uh-huh. Concha shore must be spreadin' out, seein' as the town marshal is claimin' authority way up here. *Claimin'*, I said, Hal! You ain't got no more authority up here than a jackass rabbit, and 'bout half as much brains!"

"I'll show you what authority I

got!" bawled Wallace. "All the law I need is right here!" His hand jerked to the butt of his revolver.

But Larry Neale's hands moved quicker; and Wallace and the men behind him gazed into the black, unwavering muzzles of two heavy Colts.

"Authority?" drawled the tall puncher, his eyes coldly grey behind the sights.

"The rest of you jiggers sorta sit tight," he flung at the other four men. "My pardner and me has had 'bout all the shindig we want for one day, but we ain't washed up yet, not by a jugful.

"If yuh're curious how come we're here with these dogies, look over thar by them bushes, and yuh'll see what's left of most of the jiggers what ran 'em down here."

One of the riders raised his voice. "Gents," he said, "I know this hombre. He kin bust a fly off the hondo of a sixty-foot rope with one of them hoglegs and not graze the rope. Me, I'm ridin' back to town. If you'll rec'lect, we ain't out here huntin' for no widelooped steers nohow; we rode out to look over a minin' property, and we done seen it."

He turned his horse and headed purposefully toward the nearby trail. A lean old frontiersman, who had been regarding Larry with steady eyes, called a question after him:

"What else yuh know 'bout this gent 'sides his shootin' ability, Sam?"

"Nothin' what ain't all t' the good, Horner," replied the first speaker. "He's salty when he gets on the prod, but he's a square shooter—'leasewise, he usta be, and I got a notion he ain't changed much in the last two years."

The frontiersman gathered up his reins. "C'mon, gents," he said. "I calc'late these dogies is in good hands and will get back where they b'longs. Shut yore trap, Wallace, yuh're allus gabbin' outa place; times is when I think yuh're sorta tetched in the haid.

"The Cross-in-a-Box spread is 'bout six miles northwest on the Corcega trail—take fust fork to the left," he told Larry. "C'mon, boys."

The group rode away, grinning, all except Wallace, who scowled blackly and mumbled to himself.

"The man with the broken teeth does not seem to like my brother," observed Kepnau.

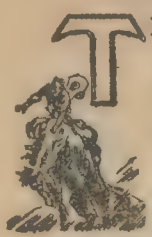
"No," agreed Larry. "He ain't liked me none since the day he was wallopin' a pore swamper in the Little More saloon in Concha. The swamper had spilled some sawdust down his boot, plumb accidental."

"What did yuh do to the man?" asked Kepnau.

"Nothin'," drawled Larry. "He jest sorta run inter my right hand and fell down; that's how he come t' get them two busted tusks."

CHAPTER II

Roped and Hawgtied



THE sun was slanting low in the west when Larry and Kepnau turned the protesting herd into the left fork of the Corcega trail, which was a little used track winding between clumps of cottonwoods.

"Not bad lookin' range," remarked Larry, turning back an ornery yearling with bull-headed ideas of its own. "Seems I rec'lect this was part of old *Don* Zacara's big spread. The Zacara range was t' be chopped up and sold after the old man died, come t' think of it. There oughta be a ranchhouse t'other side that next grove."

Ten minutes later they sighted it, a rambling old place of creamy adobe, built Mexican style with an inner patio.

"Plumb comf'table lookin'," commented Larry. "Git along, li'l dogies, git along!" he chanted. "I'm so hongry my stomach cain't git a-holt of my backbone!"

He grinned boyishly at Kepnau. "C'mon, pardner," he chuckled, "let's bring 'em home roundup style. Hi-ti-yo! Eee-ee-yipi-yip!"

"Kepnau joined in the piercing yell. The cattle bawled their displeasure and headed for the pasture

beyond the ranchhouse at a lumbering run. Quirts crackling, hoofs drumming, hi-yiing shrilly, the two punchers urged their bellowing charges to greater speed. They slid to a bridle-jingling stop in front of the ranchhouse door. The dogies swept on for some distance before they commenced to mill.

"Outside, hombres! Here's yore ambulatin' beefsteaks back from their little go-see trip!" whooped Larry. "Come an' git 'em!"

FOR a moment the ranchhouse was silent. The front door opened and a little old white-haired lady stepped onto the veranda. She surveyed the two riders with bright blue eyes amazingly youthful in her wrinkled face. She appeared mildly surprised.

"Land sakes! What a racket you boys make!" she exclaimed.

Larry Neale was out of the saddle in a single lithe movement, wide hat sweeping the ground.

"Ma'am, I shore hope yuh'll excuse me and Kep," he apologized. "We warn't 'spectin' ladies to be 'round here 'bouts."

The old lady nodded brightly. "Boys always make lots of noise," she remarked. "Goodness! Are those my cows you just drove in? I declare, I never expected to see *them* again! Paul and Silas said those rascals who stole them would drive them into Mexico. Did you boys talk with those men and persuade them to send my cattle back?"

"Yeah, we—er—sorta argyfied with them a bit, and they let us have 'em," replied Larry. "They wouldn't need 'em where they was goin', nohow."

"I'm certainly obliged to you," she said. "I—I need those cows badly. Land sakes! Here I'm standing gabbin' like a church social, and you boys must be starved. Put your horses in the barn and I'll have some vittles ready in a jiffy. Hurry, now, and come right in—don't bother to knock."

Larry and Kepnau rode their horses to the barn and looked after them. "Gosh!" exclaimed the cowboy, "she's real folks, ain't she?"

They entered the ranchhouse by the back door and found the old lady bustling about the big kitchen.

"There's towels and wash basins and hot water on that bench," she said. "What be your name, sonny?"

Larry told her, and introduced Kepnau. She nodded brightly. "An Indian boy. My mother used to tell about Indians back in Virginny, when I was a girl. One of her uncles married an Indian girl, she said. Pull up chairs now, and set.

"I'm Mrs. Sarah Wagner," she volunteered as she heaped their plates, "but everybody back home called me Aunt Sarah, so you boys might as well."

"Yuh own this here spread, ma'am —Aunt Sarah?" Larry asked after several minutes of busy silence.

The old lady nodded. "Yes. Pa was a Western man and he always wanted to get back. Year before last we sold the farm and moved out here and bought this place. We did right well till Pa died last year."

She paused, and Larry saw that the blue eyes were misty and the withered old lips trembled despite her efforts to keep them firm.

"Forty years is a long time for folks to live together, sonny," she said, "and when one of them passes on, the one that's left is apt to be—lonely."

Larry Neale reached across the table and covered her wrinkled fingers with his bronzed hand.

"I got a big hunch Pa'll be waitin', ma'am, and sorta lonesome hisself till yuh get there," he said softly. "And, 'sides, folks like you is needed bad here to keep fellers like me, what ain't got no mother, from gittin' too lonesome."

They were just finishing eating when hoofs clattered outside.

"I calc'late that'll be Paul and Silas," said Aunt Sarah. "They rode after the men who took our cows. Won't they be surprised to find them safe back home again?"

The door opened and two cowboys entered. Paul was short and

fat and so bow-legged his legs seemed to be all the time yelling "O." Silas was lanky, with hound-dog chops and sad eyes. Paul was usually hiding behind a grin, but Silas hadn't smiled for so long his face would've cracked if he'd tried it. He rumbled when he talked; Paul squeaked.

As Aunt Sarah bustled upstairs on an errand, Larry explained to the two punchers how the cattle had been recaptured. Silas nodded grimly.

"The only mistake was in lettin' one of the hellions git away," he rumbled. "Yore Injun pardner was right, Neale. You'd oughta downed that 'un, too."

"I heerd 'bout you two fellers," piped Paul. "Feller by the name of Bill Scully was talkin' over t' town. Told how the Apaches burned the wagon train yuh was scoutin' for and killed ev'body but him and a little boy they carried off to Mexico. He said you fellers rode after the Apaches and brought the boy back safe. He shore thinks pow'ful high of you fellers."

Aunt Sarah came in and began setting plates for Paul and Silas. "You and the Indian boy can have the big room over the side porch, sonny," she told Larry. "Your beds are all ready for you whenever you feel like resting."

As the blue-purple robe of dusk fell softly over the mesa land, Larry walked to the corral with old Silas. The two talked earnestly while the sunset faded beyond the Western peaks in a glory of scarlet and gold and trembling rose. Before they lay down for the night, Larry told Kepnau what he had learned.

"Spread is all right," he said, "but the li'l ol' mother ain't got no ready money t' hire hands. Them two ol' jiggers was all right 'bout the time Columbus fust dropped his loop here from Spain; but they're all stove up now and cain't keep things goin'. Aunt Sarah'd like t' sell out and go back East, where all her folks is, but there ain't no buyers, and she's sorta stuck here and up agin it. Spread would pay if it was handled right."

And so, after breakfast the next morning, Larry asked Aunt Sarah for a job.

"But land sakes, sonny!" she replied, "I can't pay you wages. I need somebody bad enough, goodness knows, but I haven't any money."

"Ma'am," Larry told her, "Kep and me is both so plumb took by yore cookin', you got us roped and hog-tied. 'Sides, if this spread is handled right, it'll pay. We'll jest stay on, if it's 'greeable with yuh, and when the money starts comin' in, then we kin c'lect our back wages."

CHAPTER III

Drygulched

WITH Larry and Kepnau twirling their ropes over the range, business picked up for the Cross-in-a-Box. A trail herd was got together and sold. The money brought needed supplies to the ranch. Larry had a talk with a buyer in Concha.

"He'll take a bunch big as the one we jest let go," Larry reported to Aunt Sarah. "Kep an' me, and Silas and Paul will start combin' the north brakes right away. I'm shore we kin dig out enough dogies to fill the order.

"That'll fix us so we kin hire two or three more hands and outfit a chuck wagon for the fall roundup. We'll get all the calves and yearlin's comin' to us thataway."

Larry saw Hal Wallace while he was in Concha. The marshal scowled blackly, but said nothing. Larry also met Horner, the old frontiersman. Horner gave him some fatherly advice:

"Keep a eye on that Wallace jigger, son. He's a bad one and he loves yuh like a cowman does a sheep. I saw him talkin' to a mighty mean lookin' Injun down the street a bit ago. Injun had a arm tied up and a rag around his haid."

Larry thanked Horner; but by the

time he came back to town, the following week, he had forgotten all about it.

It was payday for most of the ranches, and Concha was booming. Saloons, dance halls and gambling hells were busy as packrats in a shot barrel. Roulette wheels whirred, cards slithered, dice hopped and clicked across the green cloth.

Cowboys in chaps, high-heeled boots and rakishly tilted "J. B.s" rubbed shoulders with Mexicans in velvet pantaloons trimmed with silver conchas, flowered jackets, and sombreros heavy with silver. Here and there an Indian in fringed trousers stalked majestically along, red or blue blanket adding a gay splash of color to the jostling throng.

"She's a salty pueblo, all right," chuckled Larry Neale, "and it looks like a big night. I wish Kep had come along with me; he's missin' things."

Night wrapped the blazing town in black velvet through which the stars pricked like silver needle points. Larry had a few drinks, played a hand or two of poker, and had a go at the wheel. Near midnight he drifted into the Little More saloon. Things were lively there. Men jostled each other three deep before the bar. The dance floor was crowded.

"Me, I'm gonna pick me a armful of girl and hoof it a bit," Larry decided. "That li'l redhead over there don't look half bad."

The tall young puncher was a good dancer, and the red-haired girl was a lithe flame, with tawny eyes and a red, red mouth. They got along very well together, keeping on the outskirts of the crowd, where they had more room.

They passed and repassed an open window that loomed like a square of jet. Intent on their dancing and each other, neither saw the hate-filled eyes that watched from the outer darkness.

It was the flash of a vagrant light beam on metal that saved Larry. He saw the movement outside the window and hurled the girl from him in the split-second before the shotgun roared. Down he went, crashing to the floor, the buckshot charge howling a hurricane blast where his head had been the instant before.

He was on his feet again like an uncoiled spring, guns streaming fire. In the lurid blaze of the shotgun, he had seen a dark savage face glaring back of the sights.

Nothing moved outside the window, but as Larry held his fire an instant, he heard the dimming thud of running feet in the black alley behind the saloon. He reloaded his guns soberly and leathered them.

"Jest some horned toad celebrating with his scattergun pointed the wrong way," he answered the questions bawled at him. The buckshot had shattered a mirror back of the bar and scared nine gents sober. Otherwise no damage was done.

Larry took the red-haired girl to the bar and bought her a badly needed drink. He felt that he could do with one himself. Just as he was finishing it, Hal Wallace, the town marshal, came in.

LARRY had his back to the door, but he was watching Wallace in what remained of the bar mirror. The marshal's face wore a questioning look. Suddenly his gaze fixed on the cowboy's reflection in the mirror and the look changed to one of bitter disappointment.

Larry's grey eyes glinted in the shadow of his wide hat, but he made no comment. He mentioned the matter to Kepnau the next morning, however.

"Hal shore did look sorta put out," he remarked. "If he didn't have somethin' to do with that li'l drygulchin' I'm badly mistook."

Kepnau's dark eyes were serious. "You say yuh saw the face of the man who shot at yuh?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," Larry replied. "It was a Injun, all right. Some hellion Wallace give a bottle of hooch to t' do his dirty work for him, I figger."

"One Yaqui escaped," Kepnau observed cryptically.

Larry's eyes narrowed with the thought. He was recalling that old

Hank Horner had seen Wallace talking with a bandaged Indian the week before. Could there he some understanding between the Concha marshal and the raiding Yaquis?

"Hell, no white man'd do anythin' like that!" the cowboy muttered.

But he knew that renegade white men *had* done such things in the Border country. Cattle raiding across the Line was a paying business, more than one big rancher of later days having got his start that way, and there were no more skillful raiders than the Yaquis.

When Larry left the ranchhouse, he overtook Aunt Sarah walking slowly toward the little pine grove on the hill back of the house.

"I'm going up to visit with Pa a spell, sonny," she said. "Would you like to come with me?"

"Calc'late I would," said the cowboy.

Together they walked over the fragrant brown carpet of fallen needles to where a low mound with a plain board headpiece lay peacefully in the green and gold shadows.

"Pa always liked the pines," said Aunt Sarah. "He used to come here and set in the evening. It was under a pine tree back in Virginny he first kissed me, nearly fifty years ago."

Flowers grew beside the mound. The old lady plucked blossoms and placed them on the grave, her lips

moving. Above, the pines sighed and whispered their music of the winds. She glanced up at the cowboy who stood with the soft breeze ruffling his black hair.

"You remind me of Pa when he was young, sonny," she said. "So straight and tall, with steady eyes with a laugh back in 'em and a mouth that turned up at the corners when he smiled, just like yours does. I hope you make some girl as happy as Pa made me."

CHAPTER IV

Yaqui Guns

AUTUMN came, and the woods were clad in scarlet and gold, with a misty haze along the mountain tops and a softer blue to the sky. The ranches made ready for the fall roundups.

And then a whisper ran like thin flame across the mesa land. "The Yaquis are raiding again!" it said, and there was a blue haze of smoke added to the copper-bronze aura of the dying year. Stories began to come in—stories of burnings and killings on lonely outlying ranches.

Troops of soldiers rode from the army posts, and posses of grim-faced cowmen from the towns; but the red hellions from below the Line effectively eluded their pursuers.

From a hilltop amid the brakes of the north range, Larry Neale and Kepnau watched smoke signals rising in the south. Like the skyrocket exploding starry white blooms of the mescal plant, the feathery puffs shot into the blue of the sky. Wavering slim streamers that spiraled upward followed, then more rolling balls that swiftly thinned out and vanished.

"I shore don't like it!" growled Larry. "Kep, I got a hunch we're gonna catch it sooner or later. We might as well git things ready.

"This is a lonely ranch and close to the Border," the Sioux agreed.

"Uh-huh," Larry nodded. "Our nearest neighbor is Uncle John Turner and his Bar W, nearly five miles northeast. I hear tell Uncle John is gittin' a whoopin' big herd together for a Eastern shipment," he added.

Larry talked things over with old Silas when he got back to the ranchhouse.

"The walls is thick and the roof ain't easy t' burn," said the old cowboy. "I got a notion the red devils would find it sorta hard t' root us out."

"That roof'll burn quick enough

onct they git close enough t' land their fire arrows on it," Larry contradicted.

"They'll have trouble gittin' that close with four good guns workin' inside here," said Silas.

"They would if it warn't for one thing," Larry pointed out. "That there ridge back of the house is our weak point. A hundred could hole up back of that ridge where we couldn't reach 'em, and it's easy arrow range. I shore wish we could git rid of that ridge."

"Mebbe we could blast her down a bit," said Silas hopefully. "We got dynamite."

Larry gazed speculatively at the offending ridge. Suddenly a gleam lit in his eyes.

"Si," he exclaimed, "I got a hunch. C'mon, let's take a look back there."

They examined the ridge closely, and as Larry explained his plan, the old puncher's leathery visage cracked in a grin of unholy glee. It was the first time Larry had ever seen anything remotely resembling a smile on his fierce old face.

The next day, along with Kepnau and Paul, they worked industriously behind the ridge. By mid-afternoon Paul straightened his aching back and squeaked his delight.

"Now let 'em come!" he piped. "We're ready for 'em, dadburn 'em!" He went off toward the ranchhouse for a drink, his bow-legs yelling "O" louder than ever. That evening the smoke signals were active in the Southern hills.

"Looks like they got all their plans made and are ready to get goin'," he observed to Kepnau. "Pardner, I guess we better start ridin' herd on this hacienda at night."

They took turns standing guards that night, and the night following, but nothing happened.

"Mebbe they forgot all 'bout this li'l spread," said Paul hopefully. Kepnau shook his dark head.

"A Yaqui *never* forgets," he observed.

On the third night, Larry had the watch just after midnight. He lounged in the shadow of the veranda, wishing he dare light a cigarette. The night was moonless and ghostly still, save for an occasional lonely coyote plaint in the hills. Larry peered toward the south, listened.

A sound whispered down the star-burned corridors of the night—a faint, shadowy sound that was yet steadily rhythmic. And Larry—recognized it for what it was—the soft beat of unshod hoofs on the prairie. He glided to the edge of the porch, tense and expectant.

The sound came nearer, slowed, ceased altogether, and then began again. Larry slipped into the house, barred the heavy door, quickly aroused the others. They crouched at the upper windows, watching, listening.

THE night was dark, but a faint shimmer of starlight silvered the prairie and made deeper shadows of trees and clumps of rock. It showed other shadows—grotesque, shapeless shadows that drifted steadily toward the silent ranchhouse.

For aching moments the silence endured. Then it was shattered to quivering fragments by the horrible screeching yell of attacking Yaquis!

With drumming hoofs and crackling rifles, the raiders raced forward. Abruptly from the silent ranchhouse blazed forth a withering blast of death!

Kepnau and the two frontiersmen bore down on the levers of their rifles. Larry used his six-guns, the range being short. Saddles were emptied. Horses went down, kicking and screaming. The savage yells changed to a shrill squalling of dismay. A deep voice cursed in English.

Larry and Kepnau glanced at each other over the flashes of their guns.

"White man rides with Yaquis," grunted the Sioux. Silas swore a blue streak.

"Si, you do almost as well as Pa used to when he was riled," observed Aunt Sarah mildly from the darkness.

Like the fragments of an explod-

ing shell, the raiders scattered in all directions. The darkness swallowed them up. The thud of their ponies' hoofs died away.

"Calc'late they got a belly full that time," piped Paul, wiping him grimy face.

"No chance," said Larry. "You might scare Navajos off, or even Apaches; but not Yaquis. Them hellions is fighters; they'll be back!

"Paul, you stay here and keep a eye on things 'gainst the chance of some of 'em sneakin' up this way. The rest of yuh come along to the back; that ridge is what we got t' watch now."

The low ridge loomed gaunt and ragged against the stars. It was utterly silent. Nothing moved there. The watchers inside the house crouched by the windows, and waited.

Suddenly there was a tiny glow back of the fanged lip of the ridge. Followed a moment's breathless expectancy, and then a puff of flame soared up and arced toward the ranchhouse, trailing glittering sparks behind it. Another fire arrow followed the first, and then a rattle of rifles.

Larry listened to the thud of bullets into the thick adobe walls. One or two screeched through the windows to bury in the opposite wall; but the defenders crouched low and were unharmed.

"I don't see nothin' on this side," called Paul from the other room.

"I got a hunch the roof's already caught," rumbled Silas as Larry slipped down the stairs to the kitchen.

"Git them water buckets ready!" Larry ordered as he raised a trap door and dived into the cellar. There he crouched over a slim black shadow that protruded from the earthen wall of the cellar. He scratched a match, watched a sputter of sparks vanish into the earthen wall, and hurried back upstairs.

"Ev'body inter the front rooms!" he commanded. "All hell's gonna bust loose back here in a minute!"

Huddled in the front of the house they waited. Rifles continued to crack behind the ridge and fire arrows to soar up. Larry counted the seconds. "She's 'bout ready!" he whispered. "'Bout—"

Cr-r-r-rash!

A roar like a dozen thunder claps drowned the bang of the rifles and the yelling of the Indians. The stockily built ranchhouse reeled and swayed drunkenly. Broken glass tinkled to the floor.

A hurricane blast of air screeched through the rooms. Ear-numbing silence followed, broken only by the thud of falling stones. Some of them crashed on the roof, and one banged through a window and narrowly missed Silas.

"Land sakes!" gasped Aunt Sarah. "Did the world come to a end?"

"It did for some folks," Larry answered grimly. "Let's see if the roof's afire."

IT was, but not seriously. A few buckets of water quenched the flames. The air was heavy with the smell of burned dynamite.

"It was shore smart of you, feller, to plant them charges back of the ridge and run the fuse inter the cellar," Paul commended. "I calc'late there is a Yaqui tribe what gonna be short some prom'nent citizens."

"They won't even need buryin'," contributed Silas.

"I got a notion the town of Concha is gonna be short *one* prom'nent citizen, too," observed Larry. "When it comes light we'll go—"

He broke off abruptly to stare with narrowed eyes toward the north. A reddish glow was leaping against the sky.

"What yuh make of it, Kep?" asked the cowboy.

Kepnau gazed at the lurid reflection. "A barn or a ranchhouse burning," he said. "Several miles away."

Larry calculated swiftly. "Looks to be jest about Uncle John Turner's place," he muttered. "Kep, another bunch is raidin' the Bar W!"

The glow was increasing in brightness, spreading over a full half of the Northern sky.

"Looks like they're makin' a good job of it, too, rumbled Silas. "Calc' late they sorta took the Bar W boys by surprise."

Larry headed for the stairs that led from the roof. "Paul, you and Silas stay here and look after things," he ordered. "I don't figger there'll be any more trouble here, but yuh never can tell. I'm headin' for the Bar W to see if I kin lend 'em a hand."

When he reached the barn, Kepnau was close at his heels. "That's the place where they wouldn't give yuh a job," Larry pointed out to the Sioux. Kepnau nodded as he reached for his saddle.

"A just man does not dwell on past injuries when someone is in need," he remarked.

CHAPTER V

Hills Against the Sky

DAWN was in the air as they raced north across the shadowy prairie, but Larry knew that daylight was still more than an hour away. The glow in the sky ahead was brighter; it rose and fell. Soon they could hear a faint popping sound, like the breaking of a bundle of sticks.

"Rifles is still popping up there," nodded the cowboy. "That shows they ain't smoked 'em out yet." He scanned the horizon eagerly.

"It is the barns that are burning," said Kepnau as they drew nearer the Bar W ranchhouse.

"Uh-huh, but the hacienda's on fire, too," Larry said. "Look at her blaze over the tree tops."

They slackened their speed and cautiously approached the grove that surrounded the ranchhouse.

"We'll leave our cayuses here in this thicket and see if we kin worm up on 'em," Larry suggested. "Mebbe we kin do somethin' t' help."

They were but a few hundred feet from the outskirts of the grove when they heard the stamp and snort of horses. Beside a thicket of manzanita they could make out shadowy shapes.

"The hellions have left their hosses out here and are holed up back of the trees in the grove," Larry whispered. "C'mon, let's see if there's anybody watchin' the broncs."

Soon they were close enough to make out the forms of two lean savages holding the tether ropes of a dozen or more shaggy ponies. Larry watched them intently for a moment, a plan taking form in his brain. He breathed instructions to Kepnau.

Once more the two glided forward, Kepnau approaching the man nearest the grove, Larry stealing up behind the other. Like grim wraiths of death they sprang.

One Yaqui went down with Kepnau's long knife buried to the hilt in his breast. Larry's pistol barrel crunched on the skull of the other, dropping him lifeless to the ground.

Swiftly the cowboy and the Sioux worked, bunching the suspicious ponies, getting them headed the right way.

"All right!" barked Larry, "give it to 'em!" He slapped at flanks and haunches. His voice rose in a wild yell. His Colts blazed and roared. Kepnau added his voice and his gun to the tumult.

Away thundered the terrified horses, headed straight for the grove that sheltered the attackers. After them raced the cowboy and the Sioux.

"Give 'em hell, boys!" bellowed Larry, blazing away with both hands. "After 'em! Don't let any of 'em get away!"

From the grove burst running figures. The Yaquis, convinced that a troop of cavalry or a posse of cowmen was bearing down upon them, fled in mad panic. The punchers in the burning ranchhouse, seeing their enemies darting away through the firelight, came pouring forth, shooting and yelling.

The Yaquis, heading for their horses, were met by the guns of Larry and Kepnau. That completed their demoralization. Many were killed. Others raced off into the

night. Some caught horses and rode wildly away.

In the grey light of dawn, old John Turner stood and frowned blackly at his burning buildings.

"It puts me in one hell of a shape for barns and a ranchhouse," he fumed. "I don't see how I'm gonna get new ones up 'fore winter comes."

Larry Neale did some quick thinking. "Uncle John, you don't need to," he said. "There's a ranchhouse and barns waitin' for yuh to move inter this week."

"What the hell yuh talkin' 'bout?" demanded the astonished rancher.

"Jest this," Larry told him. "Aunt Sarah Wagner would like powh'ful well to sell the Cross-in-a-Box and go back East to where her folks live. There's yore ranchhouse and all, ready for yuh! C'mon, we'll ride over and talk t' her right away!"

Old Silas met them in the yard as they rode up to the Cross-in-a-Box. He held out something that glittered in the morning sunlight.

"Calc'late this was 'bout the biggest piece left of him after the dynamite cut loose," he said to Larry. "I picked it up back of the ridge."

Larry took the object. It was a silver star. Engraved across its face was the word *"Marshal."*

The cowboy nodded soberly. "Uh-huh. Guess the town of Concha'll hafta hold a election and git 'em another police force."

THREE days later Larry helped Aunt Sarah into the East bound stage.

"Good-by, sonny," she told him, wiping her eyes, but smiling bravely. "You'll look after Pa's grave for me, won't you?"

"I shore will, Aunt Sarah," Larry promised her; and his voice was gentle. He waved good-by as the stage whirled away.

Old John Turner was talking with Kepnau. "I was jest tellin' yore pardner that there's a job for yuh both with my spread," said Turner. "I done sorta changed my ideas 'bout Injuns."

Larry glanced at Kepnau and grinned. The Sioux was gazing toward a range of tall hills which shouldered against the Western sky. His dark eyes were dreamy.

"Has my brother ever rode beyond those hills?" he asked.

The grin on Larry Neale's bronzed face widened. "Nope, never have," he admitted. "Look interestin', don't they? Oughta be somethin' on t'other side of 'em."

He held out his hand to Turner. "Thanks, Uncle John," he said. "Be seein' yuh some time. Take good care of Silas and Paul. Me and Kep is gonna take us a li'l ride!"

Next Month: KILLER BRAND, *a Complete Novelette of Outlaw Guns by* FORBES PARKHILL

GUNS ROAR FOR TEXAS

A Saga of Courage! The Daring Adventures of Explorers, Pioneers, Cattlemen and Cowboys Who Blazed the Trails of the Lone Star State!

By COL. JOHN J. BONIFACE

United States Cavalry, Retired

IN June, Texas threw wide its corral gates and invited the world to enter and enjoy its Centennial Celebration, to be open until December.

General Sam Houston

Dallas is the center of the festival activities, but Fort Worth and various other cities and towns are holding pageants, rodeos, fairs, and exhibitions.

And through these various exhibits, Texas is recapturing her colorful past, unfurling a tremendous panorama of Far Western romance and achievement.

The thrilling story of the Lone Star state is being recreated—from the hour that General Sam Houston and his gallant little army of a few hundred ragged troopers won the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836, and gained the territory's independence from Mexico. The famous struggle at Alamo, Santa Anna's massacre of Fannin's three hundred and fifty men at Goliad, had taken place a month before. San Jacinto was the thundering reply which won a vast territory for the Americans.

The century that followed penned a mighty history of fortitude and faith, of daring and determination. A history peopled with vivid, dynamic figures, explorers, pioneers, cattlemen, cowboys.

Wagon Wheels

On foot and horseback, by slowly moving wagon trains, buggies, horse- and mule-drawn stages, by train and, far later, by auto bus, millions have followed the paths laid out by men

The Glorious Story of a Hundred Years!

Upper right hand corner: Republic of Texas, and boundaries claimed by Texas from December 19, 1836, to November 25, 1850. (1)—Branding time on the H-7 Ranch, Texas. (2)—A typical range scene. (3)—At the chuck wagon. (4)—The Overland Stage—Texas Trail, San Antonio.

and women of what we may well call Texas' "Dark Ages." They carved the way.

And with the opening of the Centennial celebration, more millions will cross the soil of the vastest state in our Union, from the northern boundary down to the rippling Rio Grande, from the Eastern oil fields of the state to its great cattle ranches of its Western half.

Where once the camping grounds were dotted with ancient prairie schooners, today will see modern house-trailers covering distances, within hours or days, that once took months of toiling travel and battle against redskins—Comanches, Arapahoes and even Apaches, and against the later outlaws, rustlers and badmen.

A State of Many Flags

Texas once encompassed parts of New Mexico, Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas, even Wyoming, as the accompanying map will show. In 1850 Congress paid Texas $10,000,000 for all lands lying outside of its present boundaries, and these outlying lands then reverted to the states named. Today it reaches halfway from the Mexican Border to the Canadian Line and, from east to west, covers about a third of the distance from the Atlantic to the Pacific. From its 35,000 population when the Battle of San Jacinto was fought in 1836, Texas now boasts something over 6,000,000.

Because many lands have battled for its possession, Texas has had a remarkable flag history.

There was the flag of Jean LaFitte, the buccaneer; the flag of the ill-fated Fredonian Republic; the "Come and Take It" flag that challenged the Mexicans at Gonzales; the "Texas Lexington" flag. There were thirteen different flags used in Texas between 1835 and 1839. The flag under which the gallant Travis, David Crockett and Colonel Bowie, with their indomitable 192 Texas martyrs, died in the Alamo was not the "Lone Star" flag, but a bunting with *two* stars —one representing Texas and the other star representing Coahuila which then, with Texas, formed a Mexican state.

Thriving Cities

Texas gets its name from an Indian tribe, the *Tejas*, a cognomen meaning "friendly."

The story of the Lone Star state is as vigorous and breathtaking as any olden, heroic saga. It is the story of men and women, even children, displaying magnificent courage.

In our minds, they come alive as once they were: the shaggy-bearded explorer in prairie schooner trains; the long-haired, moccasined trappers; the savage, war-whooping Indians; the swift-riding Pony Express riders.

We see them moving, a never-ending stream—Overland stages with their six-horse teams, men perched on the high boxes beside the shouting drivers, eyes peering, and rifles held athwart their laps; Indian bands, riding fiercely murderous circles around besieged wagon trains, arrows flaming through the sky, blooming in flowers of flame wherever they strike anything at all inflammable.

From tiny settlements develop thriving towns and cities. Where adobe and log huts once squatted in the sun, skyscrapers now rear to lofty heights.

Remote cattle spreads have grown to vast livestock empires.

The cowboy follows the pioneer and the trapper—the cowboy, most picturesque figure of all that colorful cavalcade, bringing civilization, settlement, law and order.

Without him, the vast cattle industry never could have lived and grown —but Fate always seems ready to produce the required type at the moment when development needs it most.

The Cowboy's Rôle

And from far and near, at the appointed hour, the cowboy rode into view with his square jaw, tall form, wide shoulders, lean waist and willingness to play his part—an indispensable part in the making of Texas history and wealth.

His rawhide lariat gave him mastery of cattle, his six-gun flamed an

Company D, Texas Rangers, at Ysleta in 1894, with a Mexican captive. Left to right, top row: Deputy U. S. Marshal F. M. McMahon, William Schmidt, J. V. Latham, Joe Sitter Ed. Palmer, T. T. Cook; lower row: Mexican prisoner, George Tucker, J. W. Saunders, Sergeant Cal Kirchner and Captain John R. Hughes.

epic story of battle and courage; his loyalty supreme to comrade or employer, his hospitality to suffering stranger, wrote his inexorable code of life.

He exists today, just as in the old days, and his code has not changed. The cowboy's magnificent self-reliance, his expertness with rope or horse or shooting iron, his love of humor and for rough sports and craving for adventure made him a little king of the cow country, and an invaluable king.

When the Centennial visitor stands within the walls of the Alamo and envisions the very spots on which Travis and Crockett stood, the very ground on which lay the wounded Colonel Bowie as he battled to his last dying gasp; when he sees the spot where Travis drew the line on the dirt floor with his saber, he will feel the drama of the Battle of the Alamo and the courage of Texans as never before.

When he enters the age-old missions and hears the historic bells ring out from their towers, he will picture the days when the missions formed the only refuge against savage attacks, the last stronghold where men and women and children died that the state might live. And when he rides about the ranges and sees the last evidences of the old cattle trails leading northward, the famous Chisholm Trail and others, he will find his mind's eye glimpsing vast herds of cattle stringing out along the trails, "trail branded" through the hair on countless shaggy backs, and cowboys dashing about with their swinging loops, fighting through to the Wyoming ranges against redskins and rustlers.

Famous Names

Many Texan names ring out in halls of fame—Sam Houston, Stephen F. Austin, David Crockett, Colonel Bowie, John Chisholm, Captain King of the river-boats who created the greatest cattle ranch the world ever saw, countless others whose lives were devoted to the winning of the West.

Many have been members of the State Legislature, of the Federal Congress, holding high offices of all

sorts—cattlemen of the old and later days who have been heard voicing fresh courage to all.

And no Texan will ever forget Sam Maverick and his vast ranges and cattle herds; for Maverick gave his name forever to be used as a term applying to unbranded calves and cattle running wild on the ranges.

The Texas Rangers

On October 17, 1836, by a resolution passed by what was then known as the "Permanent Council of Texas," there came into being a body of riders of the plains and mountains, gallant knights of the saddle who brought law into many a harassed community and to many a remote ranchman and his little family.

First called "The Corps of State Rangers," the popular fancy changed this to "Texas Rangers," by which name the force has ever since been known—and loved.

The Hundred-year celebration will have a special display showing what the Rangers have accomplished, beginning with its first duties as fighters against the Indians and coming down through the outlaw, rustler and badman epochs. Once again, when the times demanded a special type of man, the Ranger rode into view on his horse and swore his oath of allegiance, and made good ever after, to his eternal glory so long as human hearts hold red blood.

Lone Riders

Often acting under orders to ride alone through places where life was held cheaply and guns were apt to roar at the drop of a hat, the Ranger's pride was that he never hesitated against odds, and that he always got his man.

The psychology of war tells us that groups of men fight with more stamina than single individuals; but fighting alone against deadly odds was the Ranger's habit of life. With so many gallant names of Rangers living in the hearts of Texans, only a few can be named here—Captain John Hughes, Captain Jim Gillett, both of them frontiersmen of the early days of lawlessness, upholders of law and order, under fire countless times and alive today to see the glory that their work has brought to Texas.

Of the Rangers, it has been said, "They rode like Mexicans, trailed like Indians, shot like Tennesseans and fought like devils." Another apt description is, "They rode harder, fought longer, lived rougher, and talked less than any men on two feet."

Hostile Territory

Through the pages of Texan history runs, also, the romance of the Regular Army in its far-flung, small frontier garrisons, built as outposts for the protection of settlers and the endless comings and goings of immigrant trains.

In those days life was lived in the raw, hostile Indians and outlaws always close, and many a blue-clad officer and trooper gave up his life that Texas might know safety.

These little garrisons stood as bulwarks of refuge for one and all, furnishing protection, medical assistance, needed supplies. Violent death has always been the order of the day in settling a new, rugged country, and so it was with Texas.

The Cowboy Arises

When Providence produced the cowboy, it made a man. Usually tall, wide-shouldered he was, bronzed, smiling, ever ready with a joke or aid and defense of the weak. Two low slung six-guns on his thighs, hat wide of brim against the scorching suns and sandstorms; superbly daring and capable. About his throat a big neckerchief to be drawn up over his face against biting sandstorms or bad weather, to be used as a makeshift bandage when occasion required.

Wide leather chaps cover his long legs against the thorny growths of desert and foothill. High-heeled, trimly-fitting boots with soft tops, boots that will not slip through the stirrup and leave the rider to be dragged to death, and will give increased leverage when dug into the

earth for holding a wildly leaping steer or horse at the end of a rope. Everything the cowboy wears has a definite utility purpose and is not worn for show.

The cowboy's horse was always the best he could afford. He trained his horse expertly—made it light on the bit, quick at the sliding halt, ready to stand when "ground hitched," and quiet when the cowboy ran up and mounted. The animal had to be a "good feeder," able to pick up grazing in the worst places. Too, the cowboy often trained his horse to come at the sound of his whistle. The affection between the cowboy and his horse has always been a thing to admire and respect. And the horse must be "rope broke"—he must show no fright when a lariat is whirled above his head or becomes tangled against his hind legs; he must stand still and hold back on the rope after the roper has caught his calf or steer.

Master of Six-guns

The cowboy is a true connoisseur of six-guns, and a past master at their use.

During summer months, the cowboy rides range, driving wandering cattle home, attends roundups, breaks new horses, trail-drives herds to the shipping points, "punches" the cattle into the stock cars, and is kept outdoors for days, weeks or even months, in the saddle. During the winter months, he "rides fence" and repairs all breaks in the wire through which the cattle and horses could get out and drift away.

Branding Irons

When the herds of cattle grew to such huge proportions that the ranges of Texas were covered with them, the necessity arose for having some means of identifying an owner's cattle—and thus came branding.

The "Home" brand is burned into the hide with a branding iron and is permanent. The "Trail" brand is only burned into the hair as a temporary mark while driving cattle from one ranch to another or to a shipping point, across country where herds are apt to get mixed.

Such trail brands were always used during the great drives of the early days, where herds were constantly on their way from Texas to Wyoming, Kansas, Montana and the adjacent northern ranges.

The period of the great trail drives was one of the most picturesque in Texas history. Days, months of hourly guarding of each herd, of crossing rivers, of checking stampedes, of avoiding other herds, of finding water and grass before any herd was played out.

The big trail drives started short-

ly after the end of the Civil War and went on into the 1890s, then gradually stopped. The railroads had come into Texas, bringing close shipping points, making further drives unnecessary.

Meanwhile, the breeds of cattle had been constantly improving until the old "Long horns"—often with horns seven feet from tip to tip—passed from the picture.

The arrival of a herd at the end of its long drive was the hour for relaxation. Living hard, riding hard, the cowboy was very apt to relax in rough ways—roaring six-guns shooting out the street lights or trying to hit the myriad stars above his head, card games where stakes mounted to thousands—wine, women and song became the order of the day and night.

If the trail bosses and the punchers, at such times, turned to rough pleasures, it was but natural. They had just completed another victory over time, distance, Indians, outlaws, weather conditions. One would hardly expect them to squat around their campfire and start knitting.

Glamorous Places

Visitors to the Centennial will find, in every community, points of great interest, all filled with history. Some may drive down to the little town of Langtry, where old Judge Bean, "The Law West of the Pecos," lived his life. Once the great actress Lily Langtry's train stopped there for a half day and the old judge met her, instantly became her slave. After she left, he renamed the town Langtry, after her, and even changed the name of his saloon, about the only building then there, to "The Jersey Lily."

The judge was a great Texas character and was, in fact, really "the Law" west of the Pecos for a long time.

He held court in his saloon, generally on its wide front porch. Once his deputy brought in a dead Chinese who had been shot to death—nobody knew by whom. The judge searched the dead man's pockets and found forty dollars. He promptly fined the dead man thirty-nine dollars for carrying a gun and gave the other dollar to a Mexican to bury the body.

The Coming of the Railroad

When the railroad came and passed the judge's door, he found that passengers were often demanding cold drinks, so, turning his back to the bar as he mixed the drink, he would slip in a glass cube that he had always ready, and the passenger would think that he was being given an iced drink. The cube of glass was in the saloon long after the judge had died.

He possessed but one law book. That was the "Revised Statutes of Texas." He used it on all occasions—and his decisions stood! When the book failed, he cocked his gun, and arguments ceased.

Those who visit the Texas Centennial Celebration and drive to some of its towns and cities and outlands, will go away with a new, deep feeling of wonder and admiration and affection for a people who, from out a vast, trackless wilderness beset with countless dangers, have carved out a state that stands high in glory to the nation.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 53

1—The bobcat.

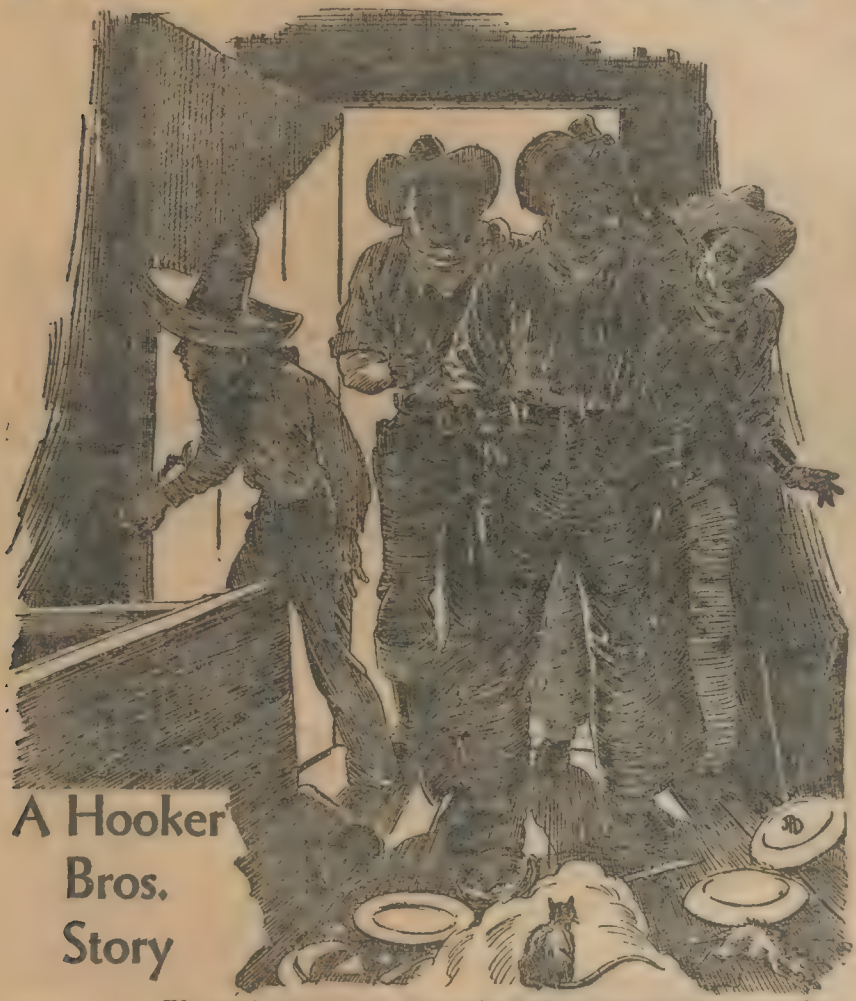
2—John Wesley Hardin.

3—Because the occupants for the most part died with their boots on.

4—Steal a dish rag from yore nearest neighbor (if he has one), rub the warts with it, then bury the dish rag under a tree, a peach tree if possible.

5—That his singin' is plumb rotten.

DOUGH *and* DYNAMITE



A Hooker Bros. Story

The cook shack looks like grizzlies 've been holdin' a reunion

It Oughta be Plumb Agin' th' Law fer a Ranch Cook tuh Develop a Wanderlust, Opines Johnny Hooker

By GRANT TAYLOR

Author of "Easy Money," "Nature in the Raw," etc.

THERE ought tuh be a law ag'in cooks. 'Specially ranch cooks. Seems like jest as soon as some cowpoke gits so old an' full o' rheumatics he can't fork a hoss no more, it's right then he collects hisself a bunch o' fryin' pans an 'Dutch ovens an' hires out to cook. I reckon maybe he figgers he's got to cash in purty soon anyway, an' he'll take as many with him as he kin.

You take it from me, Johnny Hooker, head o' the Hooker Bros.

cow ranch here in Canyon Lobo, that when it comes to pure, unadulterated grassroot orneryness, an' general all-'round cussedness, a lobo wolf is a nursery pet compared to one o' these here ol' he-cooks. Sometimes one jest accident'ly learns to cook, but by that time he's so damn cranky he won't let yuh eat the chuck after he's cooked it.

If the gover'ment wants to help us cowmen, they'll send all them G-men out here an' round up all the he-cooks in the country an' corral 'em on a island out in the middle o' the ocean. The way I got it figgered, they're Cow Country Enemy No. 1-A.

There's old George, our cook here in Canyon Lobo. About the time me an' li'l brother Stevie, what's my pardner in this cow spread, an' them two cowyaps o' our'n, "One-Ton" Benson an' li'l Pablo, has shoved the last o' the Hooker dogies out on the spring range an' figger maybe it's a good time to relax a li'l an' recooperate some 'fore we have to go bustin 'out on the calf roundup, it's right then ol' George rears back an' slips his halter. It gits so every time we eases into the cook shack he takes a look at us all same's a hog goin' to war, and starts growlin' an 'cussin'.

"I ain't wishin' this outfit no bad luck," he growls low, "but I'm jest hopin' them flapjacks swell up twict as big after they're et 'n they was before."

"Huh, what's that?" I says, swallerin' about the 'steenth sourdough flapjack an 'reachin' for the coffee.

"Oh, I was jest wonderin' which yuh lazy bums 'ud have to do fust: eat less, work more, or bust," he says sarcastic. "Me, I'm gittin' gol-rammed tired o' shovelin' out good chuck where it ain't doin' no good."

"Is that so?" I yelps. "Jest 'cause we're recooperatin' a li'l from a winter o' arduous labor an' eatin' three times a day, 'stead o' jest once in awhile, yuh act like we was a bunch o' grub-line riders."

"How about me?" he bawls, slammin' a big spoon down in the sour-dough jar so hard a big gob o' dough hits him in the eye. "How about me takin' on a li'l o' that re-cooperashion, seein' as how I ain't been as far away from this danged ranch as yuh could kick a anvil for more'n a year?"

It a helluva note when the boss o' the Hooker cow company has got to argufy with a ol' he cook 'fore he kin git enough to eat. I figger it's a danged good time to put the ol' horntoad in his place.

"It ain't recooperashion yuh need," I hollers. "It's a place to board while yuh're tryin' to cook. Yuh ought to be proud we're stout enough to eat the stuff yuh shove out an' not git a sour liver, like what yuh got."

Ol' George he starts swellin' up to say somethin' mean, but me an' them other cowpokes, we rattle our hocks out o' there 'fore he kin git set. I reckon maybe he'll know 'nough not to argufy with the head o' the Hooker firm ag'in. Jest the same I got a notion we better saddle up an' ride out for a look at a li'l bunch o' yearlin's I'm holdin' up for the cattle buyer to size up. I'm figgerin' on gittin' a good price for them weaners, so I kin pay up some interest to the Sunset bank.

TIME we mill around among them yearlin's for a coupla hours we got a appetite worse'n a bull calf at weanin' time.

"Must be way after dinner time," says One-Ton, squintin' a eye up at the sun. "Me, I'm hungry 'nough to eat the bark off a cedar post."

Which ain't nuthin' onusual for that big ox. He'd eat anything what didn't bite him fust.

We hightail it back to the ranch, step off our ponies an' go stampedin' up to the cook shack. It ain't exactly a race, but jest the same there ain't none o' us figgerin' on bein' the last to shove our nose in the feedbag.

About that time I noticed the danged door is shut an' there ain't no racket comin' out o' there, which ain't natcheral. I do some quick

thinkin' an' kind o' hang back a li'l. Seems like I got a feelin' ol' George is standin' jest inside, figgerin' to fit a Dutch oven over the fust feller's head that comes bustin' through the door. I've knowed cooks jest like that. I ain't takin' no chances. I reckon maybe I'll let One-Ton git in fust.

That big, over-growed wampus stomps right in, not thinkin' 'bout nuthin' but a big juicy steak. It's right then he slides back on his haunches an' lets out a squall:

"Cripes! What 'n hell?"

ME an' them other cow-teasers crowd in through the door. *Gran Quivera!* The cook shack looks like a bunch o' grizzly bears has been holdin' a family reunion. Ol' George has upset the table with all the breakfast stuff still on it, an' vamosed. Dirty dishes is all mixed up with molasses, cold flapjacks an' gravy. Jest to top things off, he's emptied the big sourdough jar out right in the middle o' the floor, an' a big ol' pack rat has sneaked out an' got bogged down in it plumb up to his eyes.

Us Hookers, we're purty easy goin', but right then's when we starts in an' does some fancy cussin', an' we don't take turns, either, an' all the time we're damnin' cooks both ways from the middle.

"The danged ol' ring-boned, knock-kneed, spavin-j'inted ol' tarantula!" yelps One-Ton. "Right when a feller's needin' a li'l nourishment, he's got to go an' spile this chuck."

"Jest the same," says that li'l coot o' a Stevie, "yuh got to give 'im credit for not takin' no back talk." An' he gives me a sour look.

Which jest goes to show I got to take all the blame an' don't git none o' the credit for upholdin' the Hooker dignity. I'm jest gittin' ready to grab that li'l runt an' use 'im to mop up all that sourdough, rat an' all, when somebody rides up to the door an' lets out a bawl.

"Hey, you Hookers. How aboot a wee bit o' food?"

Sufferin' tomcats! It's that Scotch cattle buyer, ol' Luke MacGoot, an' he allus figgers on eatin' some free chuck 'fore he looks at a single dang dogie. I got to say somethin' quick.

"Shore, come right in, Luke," I yaps, an' right then I see I made a mistake. "Well, I reckon yuh better wait a minute," I says, lookin' foolish. "The boys are jest cleanin' out the cook shack, an'—"

"Like hell we are!" yelps li'l Stevie, comin' bustin' out with them other two follerin' clost. "We ain't no danged flunkies."

Ol' Luke, he rides up clost an' takes a peek inside. "I will nae dine with ye today," he says quick. "'Tis nivver I would introod in family affairs." An' the ol' jasper rides off towards Bill Benz' ranch.

"Now see what yuh done," I bawls at them wuthless shorthorns. "Right when we got a chance to give ol' Luke a good feed an' sell 'im them yearlin's, yuh lazy bums have got to go an' bust yore ropes."

An' right then there's one o' them argyments for which us Hookers is noted, but when the dust gits all settled down ag'in I herds them cowyaps back in the cook shack with some shovels an' a coupla rakes to mop things up. Time we git things all cleaned up, we're so hungry we could eat the offspring of a skunk. It ain't no trouble to git some cookin' done. Everybody wants to cook. Right then's when I see a chanct to git a li'l system around that danged cook shack, which there ain't no chance when ol' George is 'round.

"You, Stevie," I says, "you cut some steaks, while One-Ton peels some spuds, an' Pablo gits some beans to cookin' for supper. Me, I'll build some coffee, after which I'll stir up some gravy. We're gonna have a li'l system 'round this dump for onct."

"Yeah, an' I got a notion that ain't all we'll have," that li'l coot cripes. "Me, I'm eatin' light 'til I see how my innards is goin' to stand up to it."

Jest the same everything works out jest as I figgered it would, which goes to show what brains kin

do, onct yuh give 'em a chanct. Now yuh take that li'l Mex, Pablo. He ain't never started nuthin' yet he didn't have to stop an' roll a smoke, but jest as soon as I mention them frijoles, he forgits all about his terbacker an' gits a smile on his face all same's the waves on a slop bucket.

Most o' the trouble I have is with that big hunk o' tough beef, One-Ton. It's hard to git him to savvy a pertater ain't got a skin all same's a watermelon. Fust thing I know the danged galoot is jest squarin' them spuds up.

"Sufferin' Moses!" I yelps. "What in hell yuh tryin' to make—buildin' blocks for a nursery?"

"Cripes, Johnny," he yips, "it's the safest way to handle 'em. Makes 'em easy to hold when yuh go to slice 'em. Last time I sliced pertaters, I trimmed all my fingernails plumb down to the quick an' sliced off a hunk o' my thumb."

After I takes a look at them dewclaws o' his'n, I figger maybe it's better if we jest leave them spuds square.

It ain't long 'til we got 'er all dished up an' slide our hocks under the table. A good effishent system allus works that way, 'specially one what works on a empty belly. Soon's them range lizards gits about half full they begins to gripe about the chuck.

"Cripes-a'mighty!" gulps One-Ton. "What in hell did yuh put in that coffee? Phooey! It 'ud take the hair off a wild hog."

"Nuthin' but a li'l more coffee," I says quiet. "Me, I like my coffee stout."

One-Ton he gits up an' takes a squint in the coffee pot. "I been brought up to *drink* my coffee," he gripes, "'stead o' eatin' it. Yuh could use this danged stuff in the back end o' that ol' lizzie, if the weather was hot."

I don't say nuthin', bein' too busy tampin' down chuck. There's a few remarks I could make about them spuds which wouldn't be considered a compliment a-tall, but I figger they're better'n if they'd been mixed with a few things which ain't never mentioned at the table.

It ain't long 'til I notice that li'l coot of a Stevie feelin' around in the gravy bowl with his knife.

"What's the idee, if they is one?" I wants to know, gittin' hostile.

"I was jest wonderin'," he says sarcastic, "which we'd better do with what's left o' this stuff. Slice an' fry it for supper, or save it to grease the ol' hay wagon."

YUH take me, Johnny Hooker, I'm allus good natured, 'specially at the eatin' table, but no bunch o' tail-twisters like what hangs around the Hooker ranch is goin' to cast aspershions on things I do.

"Yuh might take a li'l of that gravy an' use it for brains," I remarks calm. "It 'ud be a improvement over the stuff yuh're carryin' 'round in yore head."

After which the argyment becomes general, an' danged near busts up housekeepin', but jest the same I holds on to my system an' appoints a cook for each meal o' the day, seein' as how I got three no-'count cowhands an' they's three meals a day. Them range bums, they rear back on their haunches an' howl like a kiote yappin' at the moon, but it don't do 'em no good. It's me, Johnny Hooker, that's runnin' things here in Canyon Lobo. I got a notion things is goin' to be a danged sight better'n havin' a ol' he-cook hangin' around under foot all the time, like ol' George.

Li'l Pablo, he takes the first turn at supper. 'Course we expected frijoles—an' we gits 'em. We gits beans b'iled, fried an' baked, only trouble was 'fore we gits to 'em they gits all mixed with a coupla bushels o' chili peppers, which changes their complexion, an' likewise their disposition. It ain't goin' to be said that me, Johnny Hooker, is goin' to be the fust to start wailin' about the chuck. Jest the same I ain't never heard o' nobody settin' still an' not sayin' nuthin' while they're bein' scorched to death. I gits so danged hot, inside an' out, yuh could light a cigarette off'n my breath. Stevie

an' One-Ton, after they takes a bite or two they rise up an' hightail it for the crick.

"Thees frijoles, Johnee," says li'l Pablo, while he's shovelin' 'em in with both hands, "she ees cooked jeest right. Ol' George, he does not savvy the Spanish deesh."

"An' thank Gawd for that!" I bellers, jumpin' up an' makin' a dive for the water bucket.

After I've cooled my innards with a couple o' gallons o' water, I step outside to suck in a li'l fresh air. Cripes! One more meal like that an' I'll be sheddin' my winter underwear. I kin see right away I got to change the menyu. That night I sets the water bucket clost to my bed an' spends the night with one hand holdin' to the dipper, which I raise up frequent. I sweat plumb through two blankets an' my tarp an' git up next mornin' feelin' like somethin' the cat's drug in. My tongue feels like I'd had it wropped 'round a brandin' iron, an' I got a taste in my mouth like a Mex family'd jest moved out.

I KIN hear One-Ton grumblin' an' cussin' 'cause it's his turn to cook a meal. Me, I ain't carin' what he stirs up, jest so he don't git no chili mixed up with it.

It's a turrible sight, watchin' that big, overgrowed lummox waller 'round that cook stove. Makes me think of a big grizzly bear I seen bogged down in a swamp onct. Every time his right hand starts to do somethin', his left hand gits in the way. Time he gits breakfast ready, he's got grease an' flour smeared from his foretop plumb down to his hocks. He's lost a thumbnail on the oven door an' hot grease has peeled about a inch o' hide off the back o' one hand. Time he shoves the chuck on the table, he ain't in no humor for friendly conversation.

Me, I'm rearin' back sawin' on a piece o' steak thick enough for a family roast, but I don't say nuthin'. I figger mebbe the time ain't appropriate. Purty soon I reaches over an' spears a flapjack—an' bend my fork danged near double. They're so tough a fork don't make a dent in 'em. I see Stevie an' Pablo watchin' me, figgerin' I'm goin' to say somethin' mean. Jest to show 'em I kin eat anything what ain't got hair on it, I jest slips a knife under one an' flips it over on my plate, but after I chaw on one corner for awhile, I decides maybe the steak'll taste jest as good without it.

"It's about time," says li'l brother Stevie, rearin' back from the table an' rollin' hisself a smoke, "that we stop spoilin' all this good chuck an' go haze ol' George back to the ranch."

"I seconds the motion an' adds a coupla o' 'Amens'," says One-Ton, spreadin' vaseline on his paws. "Me, I ain't hired out to do no cookin', an' there's 'nother li'l verse jest like the first—I ain't goin' to do no more."

"I ain't seen nuthin' yet which 'ud lead me to believe yuh ever done any cookin'," I says sour, "to say nuthin' o' doin' any more."

"Jest the same," he yelps, "I'm hittin' the grub line pronto, 'less yuh round up another cook."

"Same here," announces Stevie. "As a pardner in this here firm, I'm takin' a vacation 'til the culinary department has been reorganized."

It's right then I know 'nother one o' them emergencies is gittin' ready to bed down on the Hooker ranch. Whenever that li'l coot of a Stevie gits to usin' them high-falootin' words which he learned out at Aggerculture College, it's right then I know things is serious.

"I got it figgered jest this way," that li'l coot goes on. "We kin hop in the ol' lizzie an' go down to Sunset an' round ol' George up an' be back here in time to have a good supper ready for ol' Luke MacGoot, after which we'll sell 'im them yearlin's."

"An' drag the Hooker pride down in the dust," I bellers. "I'll see that ol' buzzard in hell further'n a goose could fly in a week, 'fore I'll beg 'im to come back."

"I ain't figgerin' on beggin' 'im to come back," he hollers. "We'll jest load 'im in an' bring 'im back."

All the time I'm argufyin' with them two I'm doin' some fast thinkin'. I reckon maybe it'll be more effishent if jest one feller does the cookin', but jest the same I ain't admittin' it right now. Time we git through argufyin' I got a scheme all figgered out that'll make ol' George danged glad to git back."

"Yuh got to consider the ethics in the case," I says, important. "When a danged ol' desert rat of a he-cook runs off an' busts up a bizness deal, the rules says he's ridin' for a fall. I figger to see he gits it."

"Yeah, an' git 'im all riled up ag'in," gripes li'l Stevie, "so he won't stay when we git 'im back."

About that time li'l Pablo, he lets out a yip. "But, Johnnee," he says, "if you do not for thees ol' George care so greatly, I weel the cookin' do."

"Not by a danged sight!" I bellers, tastin' chili. "But yuh kin stay here an' hold the ranch down while we go down to Sunset an' teach that ol' warthog a lesson."

We don't no more'n hit town 'til them two cow wallopers hightail it for a saloon. Me, I never take on liquid nourishment 'til I gits my bizness all 'tended to. It's allus that way with me, Johnny Hooker. Which if it wasn't, them weak-minded cowyaps'd have to work for a livin'.

I looks up Sheriff Andy Causey an' asks him to arrest ol' George for hoss stealin'.

"How come?" says Andy, suspicious. "I ain't seen 'im with nuthin' but that ol' knock-kneed pinto yuh give 'im."

"Yeah," I says, "but I ain't give 'im no bill o' sale which says he can pile on that ol' pony an' quit the flats."

"Jest the same," says Andy, "I ain't mixin' up in no family row, 'specially the Hooker family. Yore danged outfit hands me 'nough trouble without me askin' for more."

I see right away I got to let Andy in on the li'l scheme I got figgered out to teach ol' George a lesson an' make 'im danged glad to git back to the ranch, which is to have him arrest ol' George an' slough 'im in jail, after which I'll come around an' withdraw the charge, pervided he agrees to come back to the ranch an' 'tend to bizness.

"In which case," says Andy, "I'll take a chanct an' throw 'im in jail, if it'll help to git the danged Hooker outfit out o' town. I don't sleep none too good when I knows they're runnin' loose."

I figger that maybe it's jest as well if I ain't around when he collars ol' George, seein' as how I'm a party to the perceedin's, so I sneaks over an' joins One-Ton an' li'l Stevie where they're hangin' their dewclaws on the bar. After I imbibes a few straight ryes, I lets Stevie an' One-Ton in on the li'l scheme which I'm workin' on ol' George, but them two they ain't none inthoosiastic a-tall.

"Cripes," yelps One-Ton, "he'll pizen the whole danged outfit soon's he gits back to the ranch, pervided he comes back."

"An' by golly, I wouldn't blame him none, either," yipps li'l Stevie. "Me, I'd hamstring a man what'd do that to me."

Which jest goes to show that people what ain't never had no brains don't appreshiate the use of 'em. If me, Johnny Hooker, didn't stand up for the outfit, it wouldn't be long 'til the hoss jingler'd be chasin' us away from the roundup wagon. There ain't no danged ol' he-cook goin' to twist my tail an' not git kicked in the face.

ABOUT that time there's a ruckus out in the street which sounds like a couple o' bobcats an' a mountain lion is tryin' tuh exterminate one 'nother. Me an' them two cowpokes we stampede to the door an' take a li'l look outside.

Goshamighty! Andy Causey an' ol' George is goin' round an' round. Andy's hat has got knocked off an' ol' George is jumpin' up an' down on it an' cussin' worse'n a wagon boss at a river crossin'. Andy makes

a grab for his hat, an' ol' George comes down on his hand with both feet.

"Ow!" bellers Andy an' grabs ol' George by both hind legs, standin' him right up on his head, after which he grabs him by the collar an' starts off towards the jail, with the old hellion kickin' an' clawin'.

We decides maybe a coupla more drinks o' rye wouldn't do harm, 'count o' sich a scene bein' hard on a feller's nerve, after which we rattles our hocks over to a eatin' house an' envelops a li'l she-cookin'.

Next mornin' I ambles around to the jail for a li'l friendly powwow with Andy an' to see if ol' George has soaked up 'nough recooperashion an' maybe craves a li'l more room. I find Andy feelin' plumb hard to git along with. The hand what ol' George jumped on is all tied up, an' his face looks like he'd tried to kiss a wild cat.

"Yuh an' yore danged schemes," he yelps. "It's jest like I might 'a' expected. I got a notion to throw yuh in too, for bein' a accessory to the fact. I'd rurther tackle a bunch o' bank robbers an' a couple o' rustlers throwed in 'stead o' one o' these ol' he-cooks."

"'Amen' to that," I says hearty. "I been hopin' the county'd put a bounty on their scalps, all same's a wolf or kiote, but there ain't no sich luck."

Andy, he gives me a sour, suspicious look, after which we goes back to see what ol' George has got to say. It's plenty. We don't any more'n take a peek in 'til he starts cussin' me an' all my kinfolks. When I mentions, meek, that maybe we kin fergit about the charge agin' 'im, pervided he wants to come back to the ranch, the ol' hellcat gits so mad he jumps up an' down an' fin'ly kicks a leg off a li'l table.

"They'll be sellin' tickets for a snow carnival in hell 'fore I come back!" he screeches. "'Sides, I like the chuck here, after feedin' on the stuff the Hooker outfit buys."

"Now, yuh see where we're at," Andy growls soon's we git back to the office. "The county's got that ol' he-grizzly to feed, an' I got the danged Hooker outfit on my hands besides, an', by grab, it's 'lection year, to boot."

I DECIDES that maybe we better absorb a li'l liquid refreshment, 'fore he gits too personal. After we gits exhilirated some, I hatches me 'nother idea.

"I allus noticed," I says wise, "that these here grubline riders don't stay long when the chuck gits bad."

"H'mmmm," says Andy, pawin' his mustache. "Let's have 'nother li'l drink—on me."

After which I rounds up them two cowyaps, figgerin' to kind o' ride herd on 'em. That big galoot of a One-Ton swells up an' busts a cinch soon's he finds out ol' George ain't bellerin' around to git back to the ranch.

"Jest like I expected," he yowls, "yuh went an' got 'im on the prod."

"Yeah, an' I got some more sad news," li'l Stevie moans. "Ol' Luke MacGoot has gone an' bought them Bill Benz' yearlin's, an' now we can't pay our interest."

Cripes! An' it's all on 'count o' that danged ol' cook. Yuh can't depend on 'em any more'n yuh kin a locoed bronc. About the time yuh think they're house-broke, they slips the pack an' take off. I got a notion the cow country ain't goin' to git settled down, calmlike an' gentle, till we gits rid o' all the ol' he-cooks an' imports in some school ma'ams an' breaks 'em to cook. Which I reckon 'd jest be like a feller joinin' the army 'cause he craves peace an' quiet.

Next mornin' I lopes around to the jail ag'in. I find ol' Andy feelin' kind o' sad an' gloomy.

"That danged ol' tarrantula don't care if he eats or not," he gripes, "an' he likewise ain't perticular. He ain't had nuthin' but sheep meat, which I figger'ud be 'nough to make 'im break out."

Goshamighty! Looks like I'm jest bein' eased up to the brandin' fire by one o' them emergencies. It begins

to look like I got to back down, or push that charge o' hoss stealin'. If I backs down an' let 'im out, he'll allus have us where the hair's short, an' I know danged well I couldn't make the hoss stealin' charge stick. I see right away I got to use the well-known Hooker brains if I sneaks out o' this jackpot. I'm amblin' along slow, kind o' lookin' down my nose, as the feller says, which I reckon is why I reach down an' pick up one o' these here printed handbills like they scatters around for a circus.

SUFFERIN' tomcats! The first annual Old Prospectors' Reunion is startin' termorrow. Prizes for everything which them ol' desert rats has to do, includin' quick drillin' an' shootin' rocks with dynamite, best flapjacks and fastest risin' sourdough. I see I got to act pronto. Ol' Andy'll have a jail full o' them ol' horntoads 'fore the day's over, an' ol' George won't ever come out. It's right then I drops my twine on 'nother idea.

That night I sneaks up to the jail an' slips this here printin' through the bars where ol' George'll be shore to find it. I got a notion things'll be different in the mornin'.

"Somethin' must 'a' happened to that ol' hyena," says Andy next mornin'. "He was pawin' the air to git out 'fore I gits off the bedground. Go round 'im up, quick, an' git out o' town. I got 'nough trouble lopin' 'round here today without havin' the whole gol-danged Hooker crowd in town to boot."

Right away I see I been bringin' up the drags. I should o' been right there an' had my loop spread for that ol' hellion soon's he got out. Right now I betcha he's millin' 'round with them ol' prospectors, an' seven devils an' a bulldog couldn't drag 'im away. "Crank up that ol' lizzie," I bellers at Stevie an' One-Ton. "We'll go grab ol' George an' hightail it out o' here."

We beat it down to the fair grounds, which is right where we find 'im, all lit up like a Chris'mas church an' lopin' 'round 'mong about a hundred ol' desert rats like hisself. I see it's goin' to take plenty o' the well-knowed Hooker tact an' diplomacy to git 'im away. We amble over an' mention, casual-like, that we're ready to beat it.

"Not me," he bawls. "Not till I takes part in these here festivities an' renoos ol' acquaintances. Take a snort o' the staff o' life!" he yelps, shovin' a gallon jug o' double-geared lightnin' under our nose.

'Course we got to be tactful. Me an' the boys, we're allus that way on sich occasions. We tips the jug an' gargles a li'l jest to be sociable. Golly! One drink o' that stuff'd make a jackrabbit spit in a bulldog's face. We don't no more'n set the jug down till 'nother ol' feller shoves a danged sight bigger one at us. After we inhales a few samples o' that we figger maybe we might as well enter into the spirit o' things.

Me, I been mixed up in heaps o' celebrations, but danged if I ever figgered to be caught millin' around 'mong a bunch o' ol' horntoads like what I'm in now. If there was a good market for whiskers, them ol' fellers wouldn't have to hunt no gold mine. An' then I decides maybe it's cheaper to grow whiskers'n it is to buy soap. There's more hair to the square inch 'round there'n yuh'd find on a range-wintered Angora billy goat, an' the smell ain't much diff'rent.

It ain't long till the exercises git goin' good. Ol' George horns into every danged thing, from packin' burros to flippin' flapjacks. It ain't never been said us Hookers ain't sports, likewise we hangs together. We win a big gob o' dinero when ol' George ketches an' packs a burro quicker'n yuh could flop a calf.

When it comes to the flapjack flippin' contest, we see right away we got a champeen. He's got a fryin' pan in each hand, an' flapjacks is sailin' up in the air ten feet an' floppin' right back in the pan.

"Sufferin' sidewinders!" yowls li'l Stevie. "The ol' rooster's been layin' off on us up to the ranch."

"Hooray for hell!" we bawls, collectin' our bets an' h'istin' ol' George up on our shoulders an' cartin' him around. Purty soon we set 'im down on one o' them burros what's handy, an' right then I see we made a mistake. The danged li'l hardtail unwinds an' lands ol' George in a pile o' ore samples. The ol' coot comes up with both hands full o' rocks, which he starts sailin' at me an' them other two cowpokes.

"The golrammed Hookers spile everythin," he yelps, limpin' back over to the crowd.

It's right then I see we got to take 'im down a notch. Winnin' all that money is spilin' him proper. If he keeps on collectin', he'll have so much money he'd be insulted if somebody asked him to cook. I see right away I got to do somethin'. 'Sides, I do some quick figgerin' an' decides we won 'nough dinero to pay off most o' that interest, 'specially when I makes them others dig up, too.

PURTY soon ol' George is wadin' right into the fastest risin' sourdough contest with both feet. He's got a big can o' sourdough settin' on a li'l fire, an' I got a notion he knows jest how hot to let it git so it'll rise pronto, an' if the ol' crab wins that prize, we ain't never goin' to git 'im back to the ranch.

About that time I purty near stub my toe on a box full o' li'l pieces o' dynamite, all fixed with a fuse an' cap, which I figger they're goin' to use in the drillin' an' shootin' contest. I backs off, skeered, but jest the same it's right then I gits to thinkin', funny like, how that stuff'd help ol' George's sourdough to rise —plenty quick. I'm thinkin' maybe if it riz up too danged quick he wouldn't be so popular.

I reached down quick an' puts a piece in my pocket, after which I sneaks around to ol' George's can, actin' like I'm figgerin' on takin' a peek. When he ain't lookin' I shove it down to the bottom o' the can.

Purty soon ol' George, he starts stirrin' ag'in, gittin' that dynamite all mixed up with the dough, an' I'll be a twin brother to a road lizard if that danged dough don't start b'ilin' right out the top. I reckon maybe all that sawdust which is mixed in the powder is gittin' soaked up an' pushin' that sourdough right up out o' the can. Ol' George, he's dancin' around bellerin' for 'em to give 'im the prize. All them ol' desert rats come rushin' to have a look. Me, I'm jest wonderin' how much heat that dynamite cap can stand when—

"Boom!"

Gran Quivera! That big five-gallon can o' sourdough rises up about ten feet an' busts right in the middle, spewin' dough in 'leven diff'rent directions. If a feller had 'a' opened his mouth, he could o' sucked in 'nough to make a mess o' flapjacks. She's r a i n i n' flapjacks makin's worse'n hail at a Fourth o' July picnic, but don't much o' it reach the ground, 'count o' there bein' too many whiskers in the way. Part o' the can wrops itself 'round ol' George all same's a corset, an' a big gob o' dough smacks him right between the eyes, knockin' him over.

"Crank the ol' lizzie!" I bawls at Stevie an' One-Ton, an' for onct them two don't stop to argufy.

Actin' quick, jest like I allus do in sich emergencies, I grabs ol' George 'fore he kin git the dough clawed out o' his eyes an' dumps him in the flivver. The ol' coot rears up an' starts to argufy, but when he looks back an' sees a herd o' them ol' prospectors headed our way, cussin' an' clawin' dough out o' their whiskers, he shuts up right now.

Stevie, he pulls the ol' flivver's ears down while me an' One-Ton git busy an' unwrop that danged can from around ol' George.

Cripes! I reckon maybe I was takin' big chances, but the way I got it figgered out anybody what fools with a danged ol' he-cook has got to take chances, an' the chances are purty good they'll lose. Jest the same, I reckon maybe they're somethin' us cow folks'll jest have to put up with, like sore-backed hosses an' renegade steers.

A Square-Shooting Easterner Challenges the

Terry smashed his fist into Kittery's stomach.

A Complete Action Novelette

Tenderfoot

CHAPTER I

Cow Country Creed

IN a room above the Arivada Bar, a blond, serious youth with a bandaged cheek sat on the edge of a sagging cot and took inventory of himself and his meager possessions.

The sum total was not encouraging. Less than a week before, he had arrived in this raw Western town, determined to establish himself as a cattle rancher.

He could ride a little and shoot a little, and these attainments had whirled him into the most exciting, dangerous adventure of his twenty-one years. His lasting souvenir of that adventure was a bullet-scarred cheek.

It was a wound of honor. He had rid the region of the Sears-Foster rustler gang. But the ex-

Terry Townley Battles a Vicious Cattle King

Powerful Ranchers of Keyhole Basin!

Locke and his cowpokes looked on grimly

Trail

By
SYL MacDOWELL
Author of
"Tenderfoot Trouble," "Blood and Guns," etc.

ploit had brought him no nearer his ambition to own a spread, to settle on some part of the thousands of idle acres in the Arivada country. His meager capital had dwindled to less than sixty dollars.

It was just enough to buy him a railroad ticket back East. To surrender to the combination of forces that balked a tenderfoot in this vaguely hostile land.

But Terry Townley was not the sort to surrender easily. He decided to play his hand out. There was Lorin Locke, owner of the vast Key Ranch, who had expressed grudging admiration of Terry's rustler cleanup.

The thing to do, Terry decided, was to see Locke. With this resolve, he arose, dressed and descended the narrow, creaky stairs to the street. At the town corral at the end of the street he hired a wiry buckskin. It was still early as he rode out across

for Possession of His Own Homestead!

the rolling expanse of cactus and sage toward the Key Ranch.

Lorin Locke was just finishing a late Sunday breakfast when Terry reached the ranchhouse. He emerged onto the porch, a square-faced man of about fifty with white, claw-hammer eyebrows. His greeting was polite but curt.

"If this is a social call, yuh're welcome," he said. "I got me a notion, however, that I ain't the object of yore—"

He was interrupted by the screen door behind him creaking open again and a girl emerging from the house.

"Barbs, here, she's been frettin' herself about yore health," he finished with a brief grin.

Barbara Locke and Terry exchanged a lingering glance that was more eloquent than their perfunctory greeting. She had wide grey eyes like her father, clear, smooth skin tanned to a delicate ivory. Eighteen years of outdoor upbringing, mostly on horseback, had molded her to a graceful independence that was both physical and mental.

Reluctantly Terry turned his blue eyes from her to the wide sweep of range that swept to the east, past the shoulder of a dark-timbered mountain.

"It isn't just a social reason that brought me," he said. "I came to look over that open land in Keyhole Basin."

Lock's bushy eyebrows lowered. "What for? Nobody can settle down there. I recollect tellin' yuh I got the Basin checkerboarded."

"I paid that land locater, Woody, one hundred dollars to point out on his map that half of Keyhole Basin as government land," Terry said quietly.

Locke snorted. "Ephraim Z. Woody is a scalawag! He makes his livin' by trimmin' tenderfoots like you, youngster! Yuh're wastin' yore time by—"

Barbara gripped her father's tense, hard arm. "Suppose you show Terry the Basin. And explain your range gospel to him," she urged.

Locke subsided with a growl. The scowl faded. He jerked his head in agreement. "All right, I'll do that," he agreed. He stamped back into the house for his hat.

Barbara came to the edge of the porch. She was breathing a little faster than seemed necessary. Her face and bare throat were diffused with warm color.

"I'm glad you came," she said softly. "I want you to try to understand Dad's point of view."

Locke emerged again. "Comin', Barbs?" he grunted.

She shook her head. "The two of you together is better," she decided wisely.

A few minutes later they rode from the Key corral. A long ride, mostly in silence, brought them to the summit of a low ridge.

Here by common accord they halted. Below them lay the wide hammock that was Keyhole Basin—Locke's best grass. A rich range dotted with grazing cattle, not an acre of it cultivated or fenced.

Terry's eyes had not yet lost their thrilled admiration of these inspiring Western distances. He sat erect in saddle, aroused to new hope by the splendid view, his mind surging with longing.

HE finally spoke. "You admit you own only half of it. Alternate sections, you said. Yet your cattle roam over all of it."

The rancher flung a leg across his saddle horn. "Look here. If I had tuh pay taxes on ev'ry acre my cows grazed, I'd mighty soon be busted. So would ev'ry other cattleman." He tilted back his wide hat and raised a stubby forefinger.

"Now listen, Townley. I've had tenderfoot trouble before. I've crowded out dozens o' them. Like Dee Rucker, who homesteaded on Coyote Springs."

He pointed to the north rim of the basin, where a spur of the mountains sloped steeply to the plain. "Rucker tried tuh fence in water. The water that makes the whole upper end o' the Basin valuable range, but without which it is useless."

"Is that the range gospel that Barbara spoke of?"

"It goes deeper'n that. Land like this should never be crowded. Nature, she never crowded it. She put game on it, an' she regulated it so they'd breed copious in wet years, but light in dry ones. Nature, she even arranged droughts once in a while, which are rest periods for the soil.

"But what do settlers do? First of all, on account o' limited ground, they overstock it. As the grass peters out, they go to plowin' an' irrigatin'. That's just plain damn foolishness. In my memory, thousands o' good ranges like this have been exhausted, turned intuh worn-out deserts, swept by howlin' winds an' sand drifts.

"Then the settlers pull out an' go spread their slow poison somewhere else. This is submarginal land, like the guv'ment speaks of."

Terry listened attentively. Locke's argument was convincing, but not conclusive. It had its flaws. One of them concerned Locke's veiled allusion to Coyote Springs.

"What become of this homesteader, Rucker?" he asked.

A slow, savage smile curved the rancher's lips. "You met up with my foreman, Kittery, didn't yuh? Well, I leave things like that tuh him. I don't ask no questions. I just order results."

Terry nodded in grim understanding. "That's the way racketeers and gangsters try to rule cities."

Lorin Locke's eyes darkened under his storm-cloud eyebrows.

"Are yuh by any chance callin' me a gangster?" he asked in a dangerous voice.

"Not exactly. I was just thinkin' about what one of those rustlers said. The one they called Foster. He said, 'Old Man Locke steals his grass and he steals his water. Therefore, it ain't no crime for us to steal his cows'!"

Locke's lips parted, then closed to a thin, hard line. He glared for a moment of wordless wrath. Then he swung his leg down.

"That's purty strong meat yuh're handin' me, Townley!" he rasped. "I reckon we're done with talk. We're gittin' back!"

He reined around abruptly. They returned to the ranch in stiff silence.

It was dark when they reached the ranchhouse. The aroma of food floated tantalizingly out into the night. Barbara heard them and came out.

"It's about time!" she cried out gaily. "Supper's waiting! Hurry in, both of you."

Locke was still silent. He did not back up his daughter's invitation. Terry was overpoweringly hungry. But he said, "I'm riding on, thanks. Back to Arivada."

Locke went inside. The girl studied his face as he passed a ray of lamplight. Her gladness went. She knew that the day had definitely created a gulf between her father and the young newcomer.

SHE came to Terry's side. She laid a warm, clinging hand on his arm. "Then you didn't see it Dad's way?" she asked.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I ever shall."

"You're through? Giving up?"

"No! I've just begun. I'm going to find a toehold in this country."

She sighed. "Dad seldom bothers to reason. I had hoped—" A round moon was rising beyond the mountains. It silvered an obstinate tendril of her dark, wavy hair. She finished by bringing her soft, alluring lips very close to his own.

"There's a job here on Key Ranch. I can settle that with Dad." It was a coaxing whisper. She was tantalizingly close. The moon was making hot, pounding magic in Terry's veins. For a long, sweet moment he wavered. His arms ached to reach out for her.

But the stern, harsh code of the range stood between them. He had to fight this battle to a finish before yielding to the mad, pulsing longings that Barbara Locke awoke in him.

With a quick gesture, he brushed her lips lightly with his own. In the next instant he was in saddle, headed for town.

He choked down the desire to clasp her in his arms, smother her lips with kisses.

CHAPTER II

Challenge!

LIGHT shone from a few storefronts out onto the dust of Arivada's Main Street when Terry returned. He put up his horse at the dark corral, suppered hastily at the lunch counter adjoining the Arivada Bar, then hurried to the office of Ephraim Z. Woody, land locater and licensed surveyor.

Woody's lank form adorned a dilapidated leather sofa beyond his littered, roll-top desk. One bootless foot was cocked across a bony upraised knee. From a hole in the sock his big toe wiggled comfortably.

At Terry's abrupt entrance, he plopped both feet to the floor. He dropped the county newspaper that he was reading.

"Why, love a duck if it ain't young Townley! Say, yuh shore snappered them rustlers, all right! The *Gazette*, here, says that the Cattlemen's Co-operative aims tuh reward yuh, mebbe!"

"Let's talk about that hundred I paid you to locate me in Keyhole Basin," interrupted Terry.

Woody's face changed with the suddenness of a lantern slide. "That's water gone over the dam," he stated.

Terry crossed the room till he was standing over the man. There was a solid bulge in his sleeves and his blue eyes flashed with purpose.

"I ought to work your hide loose!" he declared. "But I didn't come for that—yet. What do you know about a certain Dee Rucker and a place called Coyote Springs?"

Woody stayed steadfastly glued to the leather sofa. At his feet the newspaper was spread open. His crafty eyes clung to the paragraph that told of a possibility of reward money for the captor of Sears and Foster.

"There's no call for yuh to go packin' a chip, Townley," he said placatingly. "Shore, I know Rucker. I know Coyote Springs, too. It's real good land. One hundred an' sixty acres o' deep grass. Water till hell won't have it. Grand set-up for a one-man cow ranch. And I happen tuh know that Rucker craves tuh sell."

"Where is Rucker?"

"Went tuh work down tuh Boulder Dam."

"All right. We'll offer him a hundred for an option on Coyote Springs."

"Where's the hundred?" Woody asked warily.

"You've got it! You'll pay it over, too, to clinch the deal!"

The brindly hackle fringe around Woody's ears seemed to stiffen. "But that ain't bizness! I never guarantee yuh'd like Keyhole Basin! I'll write tuh Rucker if yuh say so, but—"

"Come along over to the railroad station. We're wiring this man Rucker."

He urged Woody to his feet. A few minutes later, in the depot waiting room, Terry handed a terse telegram to a sleepy station agent.

It said:

ONE HUNDRED FOR OPTION ON COYOTE SPRINGS STOP RUSH YOUR ANSWER.

He handed Woody the pencil and ordered him to sign it.

"But—but what if Rucker ain't int'rested? Yuh know, it ain't healthy for me tuh git mixed up in a deal like this! The big outfits, they'll git hostile!"

"Sign it anyhow. I have an idea Rucker will accept."

Woody obeyed. Terry left him then. He crossed the street to his rooming-house. A stalwart figure in olive-drab was emerging from the lunch counter.

Captain King, commandant of a CCC camp on Ute Peak, was a new and unique figure in this community where cattle people had for so long predominated. He greeted Terry cordially.

"When are you coming out to get acquainted with the boys at my camp?" he asked. "You've become a sort of hero among them, on account of your rustler cleanup."

"Maybe I'll have the chance soon,

Captain," Terry replied. "We'll probably be neighbors. I expect to settle at Coyote Springs, over beyond your camp."

As he spoke, Terry was aware of a shadowy figure which had suddenly halted in the doorway of the nearby saloon.

Captain King's face went serious. He nodded. "I know the place, Townley. I hope you have no trouble. The ranchers in this district don't take kindly to settlers."

"Yes, I've heard that."

"Well, good luck." Captain King made towards a hitch-rack. He untied his horse, mounted, and rode off in the direction of Ute Peak, which lay between the Key Ranch and Coyote Springs. Terry called out a "good night" and stepped toward the stairs of his rooming-house. The man who had been lurking in the saloon entrance slouched forward, blocking his way.

It was the swarthy, sullen-eyed Jack Kittery, Locke's foreman. "Hold on, pilgrim!" he ordered. "What's this foolishment about Coyote Springs, huh?"

Their eyes were at a level, Kittery's outthrust jaw bringing their faces close.

"Keep away from me, Kittery," Terry said evenly. "I'm not reporting my affairs to Locke."

"Well, *I* am!" sneered Kittery. "I got a notion the boss'll be right int'rested. Mebbe I can tell yuh beforehand what he'll say. He'll say, 'Vamoose, tenderfoot!'"

Terry started to push past. Kittery jolted him against the shoulder. He rasped: "Just a minute! I ain't done talkin' at yuh, Townley!"

Sooner or later a clash with Kittery had to come. If Terry backed down now, Kittery's bullying would never end. Terry acted with swift decision. He put all his weight behind a flashing left hook to the foreman's jaw, snapping the surprised puncher's head up with a crack.

Kittery staggered back, crashing against a door-frame in time to save himself from falling. Terry had passed him and was starting up the stairs. With a bull-like roar, Kittery charged into the doorway and started up in pursuit.

They met on the landing at the top. In a crouching rush, Kittery attacked, slugging viciously. There was no escaping that rain of blows entirely. Rocking his body as they came, Terry guarded himself until he saw an opening, then lashed in.

He got a left and right to Kittery's face that hurled the man back. At the top of the stairs Kittery stumbled, groped wildly for a railing post, missed it, then crashed down the stairs. He tumbled the length of the steep flight to the street.

He tumble-bugged for an instant, then regained his feet. He spouted curses as he went for his holster. He found it empty. His gun had fallen on one of the lower steps. He plunged toward it.

TERRY called down, "Don't try it, Kittery! I've got you covered, like a frog in a well!"

Terry was actually weaponless. But Kittery was not sure of that. He hesitated, one hand reaching out for the six-gun on the stairs, his furious face a dullish red under the dim lamplight that shone from the hallway above. He had an oozing welt across his mouth. He was bareheaded, his wide-brimmed hat having preceded him down the steps.

Kittery's courage, like that of all bullies, was purely a bluff. "I don't aim tuh use my gun, pilgrim! Not yet! There'll be another day!" he threatened.

"Then grab it and travel!" Terry ordered.

Kittery obeyed. With a parting glare of rage, he vanished. Terry went to his room and locked the door behind him. His break with Lorin Locke was no definite and irreparable.

But he was too tired from his long, hard day to waste any precious energy in worrying. He threw open a window, stretched out on the narrow cot that seemed to be equipped with a kindling-stuffed mattress, and was soon asleep.

He awakened early, and almost before he was dressed, steps sounded

in the hall outside. A sharp rap came at his door.

Who could it be? Was Kittery back, looking for more trouble? Terry called out, "Who's there?"

"It's me, Woody," came the answer. "Open up—I got news."

Terry pushed back the bolt. The door swung open and the land locater pushed in. He thrust a Western Union telegram into Terry's hand.

Terry read it quickly. It was almost as brief as his own message. It was addressed to Woody, and it said:

ACCEPT STOP GOOD LUCK TO NEW OWNER STOP HE'LL NEED IT. RUCKER.

CHAPTER III

Coyote Springs

THAT morning Terry invested his remaining capital of sixty dollars in accumulating supplies and acquiring an outfit. The first item that he purchased at Arivada's general store was a .45 six-shooter and gun-belt. He filled the loops with shiny new cartridges.

He stretched his credit before he finished his other purchases, which he topped off with a new Stetson hat. At the corral he bought the buckskin he had ridden the day before, also a span of small, wiry red mules with pack saddles.

When this was finished, he made a final visit to Woody's place.

"Write Rucker and offer him one thousand for Coyote Springs," he directed.

"But yuh ain't seen the spot yet!"

"A quarter section anywhere is worth that, with grass and water. When you get word, come out prepared to make a survey."

"That'll cost money, Townley. Our account's even now," he protested.

"I'll raise the money on the basis of Rucker's agreement of sale," Terry stated confidently. "Now sketch me a rough map, showing Coyote Springs and the best way to reach it. I'm pulling out as soon as I get my supplies packed."

Woody dubiously obliged him.

"This is apt tuh cause me trouble," he said worriedly, as he finished, "if Locke gets wind o' the thing."

Terry didn't linger to tell him that Locke had undoubtedly been informed of it by Kittery. He packed the mules, swung onto the buckskin which was now his own, and put Arivada behind him.

He traveled northerly, across the cholla cactus and sage country, skirting the base of the mountains with Ute Peak looming up on the west side.

The distance, he estimated from Woody's rough map, was approximately twenty miles. It was mid-afternoon when he started. He was scarcely more than halfway on his journey when night came. He traveled on, pausing twice as he forded small, shallow streams, giving his three animals time to drink and forage along the banks.

He reached Coyote Springs in that star-glittering hush that precedes dawn. The buckskin aided him by locating the water scent from afar and quickening its pace. They entered a gap that gave into a cove in the easterly slope of the mountains, arousing bands of night-bedded cattle.

When daylight came, Terry beheld this troubled ground that he had chosen for his future destiny. Snuggled at the base of the mountains, which lifted back to Ute Peak, was a natural bowl surrounded on three sides by a rugged, circular ridge, creased with numberless draws.

The *boca*, or gap, through which he had entered, was cliff-walled—the only apparent entrance from the plain to the tiny kingdom within. Storm waters of centuries, coming down through the draws, had created an alluvial delta at the gap. It caused the bowl to slope to the center where, in a dense clump of willows and cottonwood, a gushing, crystal spring watered the deep earth, forming a marshy, green *ceinega*.

Remnants of the range cattle that had lingered at this rich feed ground fled back into the timber-grown slopes, where there were benches of ripening grass that rippled in the breeze.

Terry recognized the Key brand on their left hips. He contemplated the trampled, hard-grazed *ceinega*.

"The same old story—free grass," he told himself. But a fence across the gap would keep Locke's cows out on the Basin. He resolved to fence that strategic point as soon as possible, and also the draws, after Woody had surveyed the boundaries of the quarter-section that extended back into the timbered slopes.

The 160 acres lay in a square on the map. But the actual acreage of the property, in common with most broken Western ground, was considerably greater, so far as surface measurement went.

Beyond the spring was a clump of tall, graceful poplars. Near them Terry saw a small, circular pole corral. He made toward it. He unpacked the mules, rope-hobbled them with the buckskin, and turned them loose.

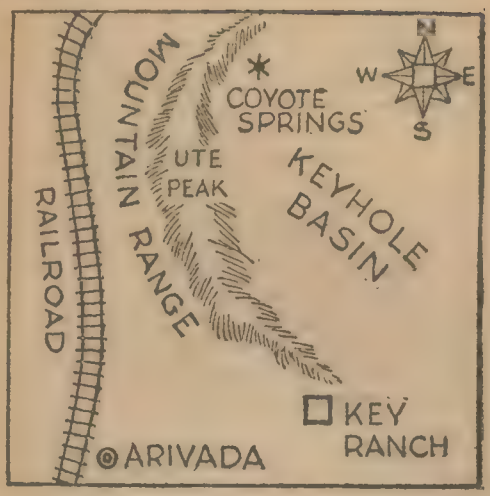
Then, over by the poplars, he discovered the Rucker house. It was an ordinary homesteader's ten-by-twelve, built of rough, split timbers. The door sagged on its dried-out, leather hinges. The two small windows, which once contained glass windows painstakingly packed in, were shattered into empty, gaping frames.

A bullet hole was ominously visible on one of the frames. The roof, built of hand-split cedar shakes, had holes through which the early sunlight shafted, revealing a rubbish-heaped interior.

It was a cheerless aspect in its lonely neglect. On the north side was a large fireplace, built of mud-chinked rock. Terry stepped inside. A wood-rat scuttled across the floor, and a bat swirled past his head.

On the hearth he saw ashes of a recent fire. Locke's punchers evidently camped there at intervals.

There was a hewn cedar log mantle. On it, Terry saw words scrawled in charred letters:



Swing off this range, don't cross the Key unless you crave eternity

That sinister warning told more plainly than anything else just how all big outfits regarded outsiders who tried to crowd in on their ranges. Terry wondered if the threat had been placed there for his special benefit.

THE first thing to do was to clean up this crude dwelling. A few hours work at clearing out the rubbish and heaping it outside by the door worked wonders.

The next thing was to move his supplies over from the corral, where he had left them to be secure from marauding stock. Terry went to the corral. But there the lure to explore his lonely domain became irresistible. He quit his task and wandered back into the main draw.

He learned that it formed a pass to Ute Peak that a hardy rider could travel. He was gone about an hour. When he turned back and neared the bowl, he was startled to see a column of smoke rising through the poplars. He broke into a run. He was breathless as he passed the corral.

To his dismay, he saw the house wreathed in flames! He was too late to attempt to save it. But he was able to make out that the fire had

started in the pile of rubbish he had cleaned out of its interior.

He was suddenly glad that he had not moved his supplies into the house. Who had made this cowardly thrust? Who had dropped the match that started the destruction?

He caught up the buckskin. He did not bother to saddle it. Tossing on the bridle, he struck out at a run toward the gap.

Passing through it to the open land beyond, he saw a tiny dust streak far down on the Basin. The distance was two miles or farther—too far for him to make out the rider. But whoever it was, was streaking toward the Key Ranch! He was putting Coyote Springs and the burning cabin behind him.

One of Lorin Locke's henchmen was producing "results" already! And Terry was certain that Kittery was the man. But as he sadly turned back into the bowl, he made a gratifying discovery.

The gap had once been fenced. There were a few crazily-leaning posts left across the opening, some three hundred yards wide. And heaped off to one side was a tangle of barbed wire remaining from that one-time fence.

That wire could be untangled and restretched along new posts. Locke's cattle could be hazed out and kept out of Coyote Springs!

CHAPTER IV

Last Warning

FLAMES rapidly reduced the tinder-dry house to a hot heap of embers. Terry quenched them with buckets of water carried from the spring, and shoveled the soggy ashes aside. All that was left was the stark, smoke-blackened fireplace. He proceeded to pitch camp.

Kak bags, containing his provisions, he hung from the scorched lower limbs of the poplars. On nails driven into the charred cedar mantle, he hung his few cooking utensils.

It was dark when he finished and sat down in front of a small fire on the hearth.

Supper was a simple rite. A coyote, yipping from the ridge, was his orchestra. Its shrill, doleful song was Terry's lullaby, too, as he crawled into his soogans to make up for the night's sleep he had lost. He spread his blankets in back of the fireplace, which would serve as a barricade against a surprise night attack.

His .45 and gunbelt were pillowed under his head. But so soundly did he sleep that any number of intruders could have invaded his camp unchallenged and unheard.

He found, when he arose in the grey dawn, that a marauder had been there. A skillet that he had left on his outdoor hearth had been licked clean. And potatoes that he had thrust into the ashes to bake the night before had been neatly raked out and devoured.

In the ashy dust were the small, neat tracks of a red fox, cleverest of all camp thieves.

Terry grinned at this loss. It was good to know that he had wild neighbors. This bowl had been theirs before man claimed it. And they exacted a smaller toll than man, who not only stole but wantonly destroyed.

As he kindled the fire, he heard a whistling snort down by the willows. He spun around and saw a small, pronghorn buck watching him curiously.

He crept around the fireplace and got his .45. But when he turned again, a farewell flash of the deer's white-patched rump was vanishing into the growth on the south rim.

He ate and went to the gap, carrying shovel, canteen and an ax. He dug postholes at thirty-foot intervals, tamped some of the remaining posts firmly upright, then climbed to the ridge in search of wood for more posts.

Unwilling to cut growing trees, he selected a standing snag of dead incense cedar. He felled it, cut it into eight-foot lengths, then with wedges of hard, green oak he began splitting the dry, spicy-scented wood.

He labored steadily, for the fence was a vital need. With summer approaching the Basin would wither to yellow stubble, and the Key cattle would swarm in increasing numbers onto the willow-grown *ceinega*. Some of the half-wild cows were returning to water now, in twos and threes, with young calves frisking at their heels. He had to protect that forage for his own use. Soon, he hoped, he would be able to stock Coyote Springs with the nucleus of his own herd.

The sun climbed and heat rose in shimmering eddies from the Basin. Terry paused finally and rested on the cedar stump. He had never worked so hard. But bodily weariness filled him with a vast content. He was building for himself, toward the future he had always planned.

He raised the canteen from the shade of the stump to his lips and drank deeply of the cool spring water. When he set it down again, a small, moving dot caught his eye, out on that broad vista below.

It was a horse and rider, coming from the direction whence his visitor of the day before had fled. He was moving at a crawling trot, headed straight for the bowl.

Was Kittery staging an open attack? It hardly seemed likely, in view of what had gone on before. Terry waited until the oncoming rider was quite near the gap. All at once he made out the burly, upright figure of Lorin Locke. He had a gun strapped to his broad middle.

Then Terry clambered down from the ridge, caught up the buckskin, and met the rancher at the gap.

Locke surveyed the growing fence with somber eyes.

"Some pilgrims never learn till it's too late," he stated pointedly.

"Barbed wire won't burn," Terry answered.

"What yuh drivin' at?" rumbled Locke, spearing him with a savage eye.

"Ask Kittery. He carries matches. Where I come from, they call it arson when a man burns down a house."

"That's a fine point o' law. When a damn nester ain't yet got a deed to a certain propitty, and his boundaries ain't been fixed, how can he say what's his and what ain't?"

"What are you here for?" Terry asked bluntly.

Locke gave him a long, hard stare. He saw the .45, hitched around Terry's middle. His own right hand was curved to the fit of his gunbutt, and it was plain that he longed to dig for it. Perhaps he would have done so had not another thought clouded his face. He reached to a pocket of his shirt and produced a wrinkled envelope.

"I'm just a soft-headed old fool tuh do this," he growled, "but I promised my little gal I'd do it."

He handed the envelope to Terry. Flushing at the mention of Barbara, he opened it and read rapidly. It said:

Dear Terry:

Kittery told us that you had settled on the Rucker place at Coyote Springs. Dad just about blew up. I am sorry you have set yourself against them. Dad would have bought out Rucker long ago, only nesters would flock in from everywhere if he did that. He would be obliged to pay what practically amounts to blackmail on half of Keyhole Basin. It would ruin him.

It isn't too late to patch up this trouble. Please be sensible and see things our way. Give up Coyote Springs and I think Dad can be persuaded to like you. A job is better than trying to buck everybody in a range feud. I hope that your answer will come back with Dad.

Yours unhappily,

Barbara.

Terry lifted his eyes to Locke's watching face. He saw now that this issue had taken on a deeper significance than a feudal struggle for grass and water.

If he clung to Coyote Springs, he would lose Barbara Locke. Already she had come to be an inseparable part of his dreams. He saw her as the ultimate goal of his labors. She was the hope that drove him on toward success.

It was a bitter mockery that his own sense of integrity was driving him on to self-defeat. But he had decided his future course that night of their parting. And that decision was unchanged.

Locke asked: "Well?"

Terry clamped his jaws against the hurt that was in him. "There is no answer," he said.

Lorin Locke reined around.

"This is my last word," he stated. "Rucker found this spot unhealthy. So will any other nester who comes here!"

Then he rode off to the south, in the direction from whence he had come, sitting with stiff erectness in his saddle and not once looking back.

CHAPTER V

Unexpected Aid

A SWIFT, busy succession of nights and days gave Terry little time to brood on impending danger, even had it been his habit to cross the bridges of trouble before he reached them. He wore the .45 through his waking hours, though, and he was accustomed to its sagging weight as well as its reassuring feel under his head at night.

He finished the gap fence. Before stretching two strands of wire along it and stapling it to the posts, he hazed all of the Key cattle down into the Basin.

Then he built a gate. He dragged down heavy timbers for gateposts at the end of a riata thewed to his saddle-horn.

He found relaxation at intervals practising rope throwing with his stiff, new manila rope. He learned that the art was one not quickly acquired, even when standing on the ground. He wondered if he would ever learn to flip an accurate loop from the back of a running horse. This was one of the practical activities of the cattle business that books had not taught him.

A deer carcass hung in the poplars now, and venison made his store-bought provisions vanish more slowly. He learned that by hanging the meat twenty feet or so from the ground, blowflies would not attack it. But as yet he was ignorant of the many ways of preserving fresh meat for camp use. That knowledge was to come soon.

He developed an enormous appetite. His skin was smooth bronze over rippling, cable-hard muscles. His cheek wound healed so that he dispensed with the bandage. He explored the draws and looked ahead to a brief pause in his work, when he could ride up onto Ute Peak and accept Captain King's invitation to visit the CCC camp.

He heard from Captain King in a strange and unexpected manner after a week of his Robinson Crusoe existence in the bowl. It was along toward noon, while he was patching a break in the pole corral with willow poles, that he was startled by the hoofbeats of a horse close behind him.

He flattened his back against the corral fence, hand leaping defensively for his six-shooter. For an instant he was positive that the hour of bullet reckoning had arrived. His visitor was mounted on a ratty bay. His appearance was a distinct shock. He was a squat-built Mexican of middle age. His unsmiling, saddle-colored face was deeply pockmarked.

He wore a thimble-crowned sombrero, and in the crook of his arm he carried a battered saddle Winchester. A shoestring mustache that made a black, downcurved line added to his expression of ferocity and gloom.

He made no move to raise his gun. He grunted something in Spanish that was unintelligible to Terry. He rode up to where Terry braced himself against the corral, and handed him a note.

Unfolding it, Terry tried to keep one eye on his caller as he read. The note said:

Hello, Townley:

I am sending this with an hombre who has been helping out here at camp as a woodcutter and general roustabout. We need him no longer, but from rumors I hear in town, I think it would be wise for you to have someone with you at Coyote Springs.

His name is Feliz, which in Spanish means "happy." He is honest, reliable and a hard worker. He speaks very little English, and I imagine you have absorbed no

Spanish yet. But he is a past master at woodcraft and everything concerning camp life. He is willing to throw in with you for "beans, boots and bullets," he says. I recommend that you keep Feliz.

Captain King.

Feliz' usefulness began immediately. He spied the deer hanging in the poplar. He shook his head and scowled villainously.

"No good!" he grunted, sliding off the ratty bay. He quickly unsaddled and stripped his slicker-wrapped roll from the cantle. He lowered the meat, armed himself with a knife of ominous length and keenness. He skilfully skinned and quartered the carcass. He peeled the meat from the bones and began cutting it into strips, motioning Terry to join him.

In an hour's time, lean venison "jerky," dipped in hot brine, and strung on twisted strands of tough grass, was drying in the sun. Terry had known about jerky, but he had not realized that the process of making it was so simple. It soon grew to look like dried-out rawhide. But it kept, and was edible either raw or cooked.

Felix explored the provision-filled kaks and again expressed his displeasure.

"No *frijoles*, no *chili!*" he muttered.

Terry grinned. "Next time in town, plenty *frijoles*, plenty *chili!*" he promised.

Feliz appointed himself to numerous tasks, among them that of cook. For the first time, Terry tasted *tortillas*, made from unleavened dough, pinched out to waferlike thinness and baked on top of a hot rock. They were a satisfactory substitute for bread and a welcome relief from incessant flapjacks.

Game was abundant in the bowl. Small sage rabbits or *conejos* had their burrows in the willows. Feliz found himself a short length of fine wire. He made a running loop in it, which he hung over one of the burrows, tying the other end of the wire to the willow trunk. Next day they varied their diet with broiled *conejo*.

Feliz knew surprisingly little English. Terry had not yet absorbed the more familiar Spanish words and phrases. But he soon learned that this strange helper was not so savage as his unfortunate cast of countenance indicated. With the livestock he had a gentle and understanding touch. He removed the hobbles from the buckskin and the two pack mules.

"How can we catch them up?" Terry protested.

"But, *mira*, look!" shrugged Feliz. He unraveled his shoestring mustache, thrust two fingers to his lips, and gave a shrill whistle.

His horse came dashing into camp. Feliz rewarded it with some loose sugar he palmed out of a sack.

In making this demonstration of the ease by which the cavvy could be caught up, Feliz perceived that the sugar was infested with small, red ants. He took the sugar sack from the kak and set it out in the hot, direct rays of the sun.

In a short time, the ants, unable to endure the beating heat, completely vanished.

Then Feliz, before hanging the sugar sack again, smeared the base of the poplar with sticky sap crushed from the leaves of a creosote bush, that is, greasewood. There were no more ants in the provisions.

But this brief, peaceful period came to a sharp end one morning with the arrival of Ephraim Z. Woody. He came not alone, but with a hostile escort.

CHAPTER VI

Blood and Grass

YOUNG TERRY was warned of trouble when he heard the bawling of close-driven cattle beyond the gap, and saw a yellow dust haze rising.

He called to Feliz to catch up the buckskin. He was quickly in saddle and riding down to his newly-built fence.

When he reached that barrier, a Key herd was milling against the wire. That sea of restless horns and backs was held there by a crew of

riders. Five or six, he made out, through the dust. Two of them were at the gate—Lorin Locke and his man Kittery.

Kittery was attempting to open the gate, which Terry had wired shut. Hunched in saddle like a melancholy bird, a little behind Locke, was Woody. His knobbly legs dangled loosely to stirrups and his hands fumbled nervously with his saddlehorn. Terry hauled up at the gate. Kittery looked up at him.

"We're done talkin', tenderfoot," he rasped. "It's action now!"

Across Terry's cheek that fresh, livid bullet scar flamed like a battle banner. "This is *my* grass," he said, "and this is *my* ground. I'm defending it!"

Locke jerked around toward the disconsolate land locater. "Tell him, Woody, yuh pore buzzard!" he crackled.

WOODY squirmed and cleared his throat. His eyes dodged Terry's. "I'd advise pullin' in yore horns, Townley," he stated. "The Rucker deal, it's all off."

A slow dread of some unsuspected treachery crept over Terry. "You mean you've been bought off?" he flared.

"Certain circumstances prevent me from deliverin' yuh an agreement o' sale," Woody stammered.

"Then we're getting hold of a new set of circumstances!" Terry said.

Locke snarled back at him: "In the meantime, we're inhabiting Coyote Springs with these cows!"

Kittery had the twisted wire off the gatepost and was about to open it. Terry reined the buckskin across the gateway. His .45 was in plain view. But he made no move for it as Kittery dropped the gate, rode past the down wire, and grabbed for the buckskin's reins.

Instead, Terry clutched the foreman's wrist. He jerked hard and in the same move toed the flank of Kittery's horse. It shied away. Kittery sprawled to the ground.

Terry was out of leather as Kittery scrambled up, swearing. He swung hard to the face that still bore marks of his fists. This time Kittery dodged. He stumbled back against the fence. The barbs pricked him. His cursing became an anguished yowl. He leaped from the contact, his shirt ripping.

He drew this time. And Terry's gun was out. But he did not trigger it. He smashed down with the barrel. It cracked across Kittery's wrist. He howled again and dropped the weapon. Terry's left lashed out, jarring the foreman's head back. Then he holstered his own six-shooter as Kittery lowered his head and charged.

Locke's hand had gone to his gun. But it paused there. A fight like this was worth going a long way to see. He did not intend to deprive himself of the lusty pleasure of watching it.

Kittery's blood-flecked face came up inside Terry's guard and they clinched. It was rough-and-tumble now. Kittery knew that game. He threw Terry. Then he gouged at his face with flashing spurs.

Flinging up an arm, Terry felt the long rowels slash his sleeve. He grabbed the boot and upset Kittery. That gave him time to get to his feet again. In the next instant they had squared off, and were swapping a fierce, fast exchange of blows that left them hot and blowing after a minute of it.

Locke was grinning savagely. "Kittery, this one ain't so easy tuh handle as Rucker!" he boomed. This entertainment was worth a delay. He didn't notice his other riders closing in from the flanks of the herd to witness the clash.

A glancing blow opened Terry's cheek wound. Blood trickled hotly to his neck and shoulder, where his shirt was ripped away. But he was unhurt otherwise, and those days of hard work had toughened him. Kittery was purplish and gasping.

Terry worked toward the foreman, who circled warily. He crouched, his smeared, snarling face well covered. Terry feinted, his guard shifted, then with all his strength he drove a blow to the pit of the other's stomach.

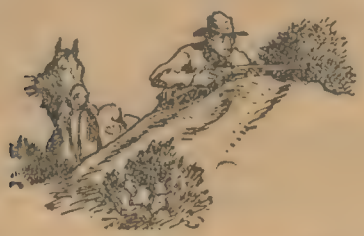
Kittery pinwheeled backward and

out through the open gate, colliding against Locke's horse as he went down, holding his middle. He tried to get up, croaked something, and got as far as his hands and knees, head wagging, blood dripping to the dust between his hands.

Then Terry saw the other riders, clustered behind Locke and Woody. He saw the unguarded herd start to spread. Here was a moment of opportunity. He scooped up Kittery's fallen gun, aimed it over his head, and emptied it.

The herd stampeded, as the gun echoes beat down on them from the walls of the gap. Kittery reeled to his feet and grabbed at his horse as it tried to bolt past him.

Locke was raging about, bawling orders. Terry hurled Kittery's gun at the tails of the moving herd. All at once he found himself in undis-



puted possession of the gate. Woody sat there, blinking.

"Love a duck!" he croaked. "That was shore beautiful!"

The herd was breaking, spreading; the air shuddered with the thunder of their hoofs. Terry shouted:

"Come in here, Woody!" He leveled his gun at the other's cringing middle. He motioned him through the gate, then closed it and mounted his buckskin.

"Now let's have it out," he demanded. "Where do you stand, Woody? What's your game?"

"Hell, can't yuh see?" Woody wailed. "Old Man Locke, he won't let me function! I can't help myself! I ain't enough people!"

"Rucker wants to sell and I want to buy. Locke can't stop that," Terry said resolutely.

"When they come back, they'll come a-pumpin' lead stoppers!" the surveyor whined.

CHAPTER VII

Winchester Talk

LOCKE and his men had the herd bunched again, and were working them back toward the fence. Once the cattle were in control, the rancher detached himself from the others. He came toward the gate. One look at his set face told Terry that Locke was going to settle things now with his own hand.

Courageous he seemed to his men. But Locke himself knew that he was protected by an invisible armor. That armor was the code of honor of the young tenderfoot.

Terry himself was aghast at this new dilemma. He could not draw on Barbara Locke's father. He knew that Locke realized this situation and was taking unfair advantage of it.

There was another disturbing factor as this crisis came. Where was Feliz? Why wasn't he out here, backing up Terry's play? Had the Mexican vamoosed back into the mountains? Perhaps his job for "beans, boots and bullets" pay didn't include trigger loyalty.

Locke came with the deliberation of a man dead certain of his purpose, without doubt of its outcome. He was going to gun his way past that fence. He rode at a shuffling trot, grim and foreboding.

Time on the cow frontier marched slowly, to the beat of the ages. Lorin Locke had learned to gear his actions to it.

He eased up at the gate and stepped down from saddle. He grasped the wire that looped the gatepost. He started to lift it, without so much as a glance at Terry, who sat ready to block the first rush.

Before Locke got the wire loop off the gatepost, the gap leaped to the sharp, angry echoes of a .30-30. A smokepuff came from a hidden marksman, two hundred yards away in the willows by the spring. A bullet slapped into the gatepost.

Locke sprang back. He gave a throaty growl and dug for his gun.

A second report clattered from the willows and Locke's hat leaped from his head. He stared at it, lying at his feet, a hole bored neatly through the high-peaked crown.

Terry was numb with surprise. Locke's riders, too, were shocked into a moment of inaction. The cattle were first to react to the impact of rifle talk. The leaders whirled, milling their way to flight and escape.

Kittery yelled: "Hold 'em!"

Then he broke away from the herd and spurred toward Locke at a dead run, drawing and brandishing his six-gun. Terry had not seen him reload, but he knew that the foreman was not bluffing with an empty weapon.

Three jumps short of the gate, Kittery cracked down. But before his sights slanted on Terry, a third billow of gunsmoke jetted from the willows. It came just as Kittery was reining to a rearing stop.

His six-gun spun from his hand and the arm swung limp. Kittery slewed around sideward in his saddle and lost one stirrup. He was catapulted from his horse, and struck the gate with a force that sent a shuddering jar along the fenceline.

Locke ran to his aid. He lifted his henchman, saw a widening crimson stain on his right shoulder. Kittery groaned, "I'm hit! Wh-who done it?"

Woody had got out of the line of fire. He yowled: "Love a duck, how many guns are yonder? Play safe, Locke, or they'll hang yore hide on that fence!"

Terry's eyes were glued to a crinkled envelope that had shaken from one of Kittery's pockets in his nasty impact with the gate. It lay just inside the wire. Terry vaulted from the buckskin, picked it up and saw that it was addressed to him—in care of the Key Ranch.

The envelope had been ripped open. But there was a crisp, green slip of paper inside. Terry fingered it out.

Surprises were piling on him thick and fast in this fateful minute. At this latest one an exclamation burst from his lips.

He was staring at a check. It was endorsed by "The Cattlemen's Co-operative" and made payable to him—for $1,000!

LOCKE was binding Kittery's wound with strips of his torn shirt. The other Key riders were making a losing fight against the breaking herd. In the confusion, Terry acted with speed.

He had Barbara Locke's letter inside his shirt. He whipped it out, hastily scrawled a few words on the envelope, then made for Woody.

"Sign it!" he demanded.

"B-but what—why—?"

"It's an agreement of sale—and here's the price!" He flashed the check before Woody's eyes. "Sign it, quick, before I haul you down and scatter you around in hunks!"

Terry was learning to do business, Arivada-style. With a shaking hand, Woody accepted the proffered pencil, touched the point of it to his tongue, and affixed his signature to the strange document.

Then Terry went to the gate. Locke straightened. "Don't think I'm backin' down!" he bellowed.

"You'd better get your cows back on your own water," Terry told him sharply. "Coyote Springs is mine now. If you'd like to argue the point, I'll make it hot for Kittery. There's a pretty stiff postal law about stealing mail. A federal judge would like to hear how you held back this reward money. Woody is a witness, incidentally."

Locke's hot glare swerved from Terry to the willows. He was beaten. But surrender did not come easy. He was contemplating his chances on one last, desperate draw. But the tension was broken by a pained gasp from Kittery:

"Git me on my hoss. Them cows, they been off water for two-three days. Time enough later tuh handle this tenderfoot."

Locke hoisted Kittery to his feet and helped him to saddle. Then he swung onto his own horse. Down across the Basin, his herd was scattering. He waved to his riders to give up working them.

(Concluded on page 108)

The Dumb-Bell Steer

He struck with all his might at Dogie's throat

Dogie Dean Horns in on a Passel of Border Country Sidewinders!

By

J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "Cold Brands," "The Flying Skull," etc.

DOGIE watched the last of the steers wade out of the muddy shallows, followed by the drag riders, and disappear in the low, brushy hills of Mexico.

He knew a lot about cows, having learned about them since he was knee-high to a yearling, but this puzzled him.

Here were forty primes, two- and three-year-old high-grade Herefords, driven across the Rio Grande by punchers belonging to the outfit that owned the steers.

The S Bar S brand was on the string ponies and on the cattle. S Bar S was a brand that might readily enough be doctored to several variations. But it was hard to think of a brand that could be faked to the S Bar S.

These steers were not rustled. And it was rustled stock, "wet" cows, for which Dogie had been watching from the limestone bluffs that lined the eastern, or American, side of the Rio Grande.

That was Dogie's job. He was a range dick, but he didn't work for any Cattlemen's Association. He didn't like working for a salary even if they had offered enough to tempt him. Dogie was on his own, a free-lancing, private range detective. He called himself a "trouble shooter." Some who had employed him had dubbed him "the eradicator," so well had he acted in the elimination of stock thieves.

Once rustled stock got into Mexico, it was tough. American law and jurisdiction ended at the Border river; to be precise, in the middle of it. Mexies did not like gringos any more today than when Sam Houston and his Texans licked the stuffing out of Santa Anna and his greasers.

Why S Bar S cowboys should drive S Bar S steers over the river was hard to fathom. The market on the Mexican side was no better, the prices far less.

And these had been tops, well over half a ton of meat on every set of hoofs. From the bluff, sitting in a cleft shaded with chaparral, Dogie's brown eyes, that looked so much like the eyes of a wandering maverick calf—the eyes of a motherless dogie—had counted them, estimated their weight, recognized three of the five punchers, and even one of the steers.

Dogie had been out to the S Bar S a week ago, talking turkey to Sam Sowley, owner of the big spread. Sowley said that he had not been losing any steers that he knew of. He was not looking for any rustlers. Sowley had not been cordial, and Dogie had ridden away without a contract.

There had been a bunch of steers held in one of the headquarters corrals. Dogie fancied it might be for shipment, and for dehorning before shipment, so that the animals would not punish each other in the boxcars going East.

Sowley had a dehorning machine—a contrivance that held the steer's body, head and neck while the horns were clipped close to the skull and the frontals of heavy, curly hair were treated with tar to protect them against flies and to stop them from bleeding.

But now Dogie believed the steers that had crossed the river were the same he had seen in the corral. He could swear *one* of them was. A steer with a big white dumb-bell on its right side, conspicuous on the red field. Dogie would know that steer anywhere. Certainly none of this herd had been dehorned.

He rolled himself a quirly and lay back, looking up at three buzzards on patrol, wings outspread against the cloudless Texas sky, deep blue and seemingly as hard as turquoise. He envied them their perfect, effortless flight, gliding against the wind currents, watchful of all that lay below, watchful of other buzzards, waiting to see one drop to carrion, and then swoop down to join the feast.

THEIR shadows flitted over the bluffs, and one flew over Dogie's face. Then, with equal silence, another shadow fell on the trouble shooter, and he looked up into the face of a stranger.

The man was Mexican. He might have been born on the Texas side of the river; he might have become a naturalized citizen of the United States; but he was Mexican just the same.

Dogie knew that all Mexies, no matter for whom they voted, remained native in heart, language, customs and costume. They ate Mexican food. They hated all gringos. They were a mixture of Spanish and Indian, and to Dogie every last one of them was a breed, with the vices

of both blood strains and the virtues of neither.

He did not like the looks of this one, though the man smiled at him as he twisted a snaky mustache that partly framed his thin, cruel lips. He had a nose like a hawk's beak, with a scar on the tip of it, and black, shifty eyes.

He was dressed in a *charro* costume. Short *jaqueta* and wide bottomed *pantalones* were of dressed buckskin. The slashing of the *pantalones* was filled in with purple silk, laced with silver. There was silver bullion about the saucer-rim of his high-crowned sombrero; bullion lace trimmed the *jaqueta*. More silver was in the handle of a *cuchillo* that showed above his silken sash that matched the slashings. His shirt was yellow silk.

He was a romantic enough figure, theatrical to anybody but a southwesterner. But he wore it all with an air. It was not a masquerade. He might not be *hidalgo*, but he was *caballero*.

He looked like a bandit chief; he was probably a *contra bandista*, a smuggler of brandy, of pearls, lace and shawls, perhaps of *mescāle*. Perhaps of Chinamen, landed at the head of the Gulf of California, brought to their land of promise—the United States—at five hundred dollars a head—in gold.

"Amigo," he said to Dogie, "it is not wise to take a *siesta* een this 'eat. This is not 'ealthy climate for a stranger."

For all his bravado, his shifty eyes could not meet Dogie's inquiring stare.

Dogie got to his feet. He felt a dislike he believed was mutual. This Mexie had a nerve talking to a native-born American in that fashion. It had been smoothly spoken, but it was a threat. And Dogie did not like threats.

Dogie looked meek and mild. His ears were large and they stuck out like those of a bat. He was below medium size, and he seemed inoffensive, born to be picked on, to be bluffed and bullied.

Dogie did not mind his appearance. He often found it an asset to be underrated. That this Mexie's politeness was merely a cover for hatred and cruelty, as a sheath may cover a dagger; that he enjoyed the play of cat and mouse, and was a bully at heart, was readily apparent to Dogie. The *caballero* figured he could be bluffed, when he might as well have told the Rio Grande to run north instead of to the sea.

"Then," said Dogie, "if *you* stuck around long enough, an' ceased to be a stranger, the climate might work out all right?"

"If you did not die first, señor. Men die of many diseases out 'ere. Some of curiosity."

"THEY opine it killed a cat," said Dogie. The Mexican frowned. He began to have a slight suspicion that Dogie was poking fun at him. He held his dignity in high esteem.

"It 'as killed more than cats, señor," he said, and ran the tip of his tongue about the edges of his thin mouth. "I see you watch the river?"

"Wonderin' erbout the fishin'," answered Dogie.

"It is not *muy bueno*. Catfish an' river 'orse." Save for his h's, his English was excellent. So was Dogie's Spanish, but he was not airing it.

"Tell me they's alligators further down," he said.

"Si, señor. The river also 'as its dangers. It gives off fever. Also there are quicksands, that 'old many secrets."

"I wonder," thought Dogie to himself, "if this jasper thinks I'm a revenue agent? I'd like to sabe if he's interested in those S Bar S cows."

"It shore is fine of you to be so interested in my health," he said aloud. "I reckon I'll hev to use my own jedgment, jest the same."

"It is as the señor wishes," replied the other, with a shrug of his shoulders and a twitch of his snaky mustache that was in itself a subtle threat. *"Vaya con Dios."*

His "go with God" sounded more like "go to the devil" to Dogie, as

the other whistled, and his mount, a tricolored *pintado,* came from where it had been nibbling herbage. Its rigging, like that of its master, was showy, with silver and carven leather. The Mexican vaulted into the saddle and loped away.

"Showin' off," Dogie told himself, "but he ain't hazin' me off this range. Looks like things is due to happen erlong the river pretty pronto."

Presently, Dogie had some jerked venison and cold *tortillas* for himself. There was water in a small spring that came clear and cold from the limestone. He had enough tobacco, papers and matches. There would be an early full moon. He resolved to make a picnic for an indefinite period, until something definite occurred.

That came around midnight. Dogie had catnapped, off and on, waking up at frequent intervals. The moon was high. It turned the silty, dirty-red flow of the river to pools and streams and trickles of quicksilver.

The S Bar S steers were returning. First came the point rider, then the swings, keeping the stock close as they crossed the treacherous currents banked about with shifting as well as settled quicksands; then the two drags.

"If they ain't the same steers, I'll eat my hat," Dogie muttered. He knew cattle. It was part of his job to observe them carefully, take notes of color, marking, gaits, weight and any peculiarity, for future reference.

His certainty was made secure when a steer, for some perverse reason, refused to accept a landing, swung about to barge back into the river. A quirt swung and cracked, stinging its muzzle, turned it again. But not before Dogie had seen the blaze of the white dumb-bell on the red hide.

What was the idea in herding steers into Mexico and bringing them back again? There might have been no sale, a dispute over prices and payment. But Dogie had a tingling hunch there was more to it than that.

And he was interested in it. Ordinarily he might not have been. It was the offensive appearance of the *caballero* that made him determined to horn into the situation.

"There ain't no greasy, garlic-chewin' Mexie goin' to advise me erbout my health," he made up his mind, "no matter if he does wear silver braid."

The steers wound through a gap. Dogie crossed the bluff and watched them emerge, making for the headquarters of the S Bar S.

HE swung his horse, headed back for El Hato, a fishing town that was set beside the river in a cleft between the cliffs. It was a rendezvous for smugglers, rustlers and outlaws, its own population entirely Mexie.

C-rack!

Something hummed for a flash of time in Dogie's ear as a bullet plucked at his hat, whipped through the felt of the Stetson. The sharp report of the rifle was like the snapping of a stout, dry branch. There was no echo on the comparatively flat top of the bluff, but a second slug came and, in its passing, tugged at Dogie's sleeve as if Death had reached out for him. The snagged cloth fluttered as the report reached him.

The *caballero* had not carried a rifle, there had been no saddle-sheath. But Dogie did not doubt that this was one of his ways of demonstrating the climate was unhealthy for strangers.

The surface of the limestone bluff was broken by fissures and gullies, most of which were fringed with brush. To Dogie's right several *ocotillo* trees flamed with their scarlet blossoms on the verge of one of these cracks. He saw a wisp of powder smoke.

He could do nothing about it but run. The crack was out of six-gun range, the hidden sniper was too good a marksman to argue with. Dogie had to flee. He spurred his mount, and sent it zigzagging at top speed.

C-rack!

This time Death did not pluck, but whispered, as the missile fanned

his cheek. It looked as if Dogie were booked for the last roundup. His sure-footed horse set its foot into a prairie dog's burrow as a *massasagua* sideswiper suddenly coiled, rattled and struck.

The mount came down with a crash and hurled Dogie over its head, clear of the stirrups, rolling to clear the snake. The horse lay shaken and winded. Dogie smacked his head against a surface boulder, half-stunned. The sideswiper glided down into the burrow, and then stayed perfectly still, as he watched one of the *ocotillos* shaking slightly.

The sniper thought he had brought down both man and horse. Now, as Dogie's horse started to get up, front feet first, and Dogie remained motionless, the killer was certain he had got his man.

And Dogie hoped the man would come in close to make sure, to see if he could find any loot on the body, secure the horse and rigging.

Dogie did not think his horse was lamed badly. He felt sure the mount would stand by, at least for a while. He had kept rolling so that he now lay on his back, his right side hidden from the man he saw coming out of the gully.

A *peon,* rather than a *vaquero,* probably on foot. That approach would have given him better chances of sneaking up to where he could watch Dogie in the moonlight. And a mighty good shot, for all the brilliance of the night. The moon was well overhead, shadows were short. The steady, brilliant Texas stars helped the illumination.

Dogie watched him come, rifle at port, watching his victim narrowly. Dogie's horse got nervous but it did not move away. If this *ladrone* took a notion to fire again, Dogie's goose was cooked. His hope lay in the idea that another shot might scare off the horse, and the killer knew it.

A dozen feet away, the man stopped for a final inspection. Satisfied, he set down his rifle and drew a long blade of steel that glittered, reflecting the moonlight. Dogie felt an awful desire to sneeze. It seemed to him that an army of ants was marching over him, underneath his clothes.

The man's eyes glittered like his knife, his mouth twisted. He talked to himself aloud.

"Now, accursed gringo, I cut your throat," he said gloatingly. "I leave you for the buzzards, the wolves, and then the beetles and the worms. I give them all a feast. They eat only carrion, so your flesh will please them."

He stood over Dogie with the weapon poised. He started to kneel as the horse trotted off a little. He meant to make a quick finish before the horse got too far away. He was a trifle undecided whether to tackle the animal first, or settle the question with his master.

He saw Dogie's eyes open, he caught the movement of Dogie's hand, the gleam of his hogleg barrel. And he dropped to one knee and struck with all his might and speed for Dogie's throat, as the six-gun muzzle spat fire and the bullet crashed in through the frontal bone between his eyes.

THE dead man fell heavily upon Dogie, the keen edge of his knife barely grazing Dogie's throat. The body of the *ladrone* lay heavily sprawled over him, while a dark bubble formed between the dead eyes. Dogie heaved the corpse aside and stood up.

The Mexie's half Indian features were repulsive. He had the face of a toad, with a wide mouth half open to the fallen jaw. He was barely as tall as Dogie, lighter built. Dogie lifted him in a fireman's grip, carried him to the gully by the *ocotillos,* and left him there.

"Let us see what the buzzards and the wolves, the beetles and the worms make of *you,*" he muttered as he turned away.

The place was unhealthy. El Hato would be far from a health resort. But Dogie mounted and kept on his way. His smooth, boyish face was grimly set, his brown, calflike eyes were hard as agates.

The squat *posada* in El Hato was a miserable excuse for an inn, for its whitewashed adobe walls were peeling, its shutters were askew, and the balconies drooped. But it was popular on occasion, and this seemed one of them. The rest of the village was asleep, but song and laughter, shouting and spasmodic attempts at music, came from the *Posada*.

It was well after two o'clock in the morning when Dogie arrived, and rode under the arch that led into the central patio. Other horses were there, hitched to a rail by the fountain. More were in an outer corral. Dogie left his mount and went from the court into the *Posada*.

There were gambling games in full swing. Several men were lined up at the bar. Some were dancing clumsily with blowsy and fattish Mexie girls to the strains of a fiddle and a guitar, stressed by the strumming of an Indian drum.

It was a mixed company; Mexies, whites, breeds and a few full-blooded Pimas. Dogie's entrance made somewhat of a sensation. He did not look very formidable, but he evidently intrigued the crowd.

He felt that they had talked about him, and not favorably. Now they regarded him as men might look at a man who was supposed to be dead. It was certain that his resurrection was not popular.

He had an idea the *caballero* had described him as a "nosey" person, assuring the clients of the *Posada del Rio* that he had taken the "proper" methods of getting rid of him.

Dogie had the notion that they were wondering why such a fuss had been made over so mild appearing a person. He greeted them in friendly fashion, tossed two double-eagles in gold on the bar, and spoke in excellent Mexican-Spanish, inviting all to drink to health.

"Not *my* health, señors, but health in general, which I am told is scarce 'round here for strangers. Here's to health for all of us, and long life to those who deserve it."

Some of them jeered, but all drank. He looked so harmless that they began to feel the *caballero* had been mistaken about him. There was surely nothing dangerous about this meek-faced youth.

Only Dogie's *caballero*, who was there, scowled. He had boasted of having disposed of this intruder, he had described Dogie so well that none could doubt who he was. And here he appeared, buying the drinks with gold! Dogie called over to him:

"We have met before, *amigo*. You wished I should go with God, and surely I have been protected. We meet again. My health is still good. But I met a man who is not so healthy. I sadly fear, señor, that by now he may be dead. He looked very sick when I left him."

THE hard eyes of the man who styled himself *Don Manuel Tamayo y Masas y Durán* glowed crimson as twin garnets. This gringo had escaped the bullets of the *bravo*, Martinéz Rosa, who boasted justly that he had never failed to down his man. And he knew, as he looked into Dogie's brown eyes — now quite opaque and inscrutable — that Martinéz was dead.

There was more to it than that. Don Manuel was quick to observe and reflect popular approval. In this mixed gang of outlaws there were some who laughed at him, who inclined toward the newcomer. But he had his own immediate following, who obeyed him blindly.

Mexies began to crowd Dogie at the bar, even to shove him. One trod on his foot. Dogie had no mind to be ganged-up. He wanted to know the *caballero's* game, why he objected to his watching the river while the S Bar S steers were crossing; why, especially, he wanted him wiped out when those steers returned.

Dogie knew that some of the crowd were well inclined, ready to be swayed by a demonstration that would strike their fancy. These were Americans. They fraternized with the Mexies because of mutual illegal interests, but they were not entirely *renegados* at heart. Every man has sympathy with the under dog, espe-

cially if he suddenly proves himself a champion.

"Señor," said Dogie to the man who had stepped on his foot, "it happens that I have no *callos*, but I have not heard you apologize. It may be that I am a little deaf, though I think not."

The Mexie was well drunk on *mescale*. He caught the eye of Don Manuel, his paymaster.

"I make no apology to any *maldito* gringo," he said. "You are all like dogs. You will apologize to me or I will cut your heart out, and feed it to the dogs in the street. *So.*"

He whipped a blade from behind his neck as he stepped back, swung his arm in a downward and then an upward curve, in a stroke that would have disemboweled Dogie then and there.

Dogie knew that thrust, and countered with an adroit kick that sent the *cuchillo* flying. It twinkled to the low ceiling and hung, imbedded, from a beam.

A little group of men gathered around the two, men not too keen to get hurt, though ready enough to see another man go down, squirming in agony, spouting blood.

"Now you and I have empty hands," said Dogie. "Look at this left hand of mine."

He showed it—empty. They all stared, including Don Manuel.

"Now the right," said Dogie mildly. Now they stared until their eyes bulged. They had not seen any definite movement as Dogie's hand slid to his gun-butt. The weapon slid from its holster into action as precise and swift as the strike of trout on a minnow.

It covered the Mexie. His brown face went grey, his skin became gooseflesh, his blood congealed in the belief that he was about to become a corpse.

Back of the Mexie, Don Manuel scowled but the draw had checked him, given him cause to think.

Then Dogie laughed, and slid his hogleg back into leather.

"I don't like you, hombre," he said gently to the Mexie. His next move was not quite so mild. One step took him behind the man. He twisted his left hand in the other's collar, seized him by the slack of his pants with his right.

"This," Dogie went on, quietly, "is what is known as the Frog's March."

He forced forward with his left hand, he yanked and lifted with his right, and the Mexie, squirming but impotent, was urged over the floor into the patio. The Americans in the room laughed and cheered.

DON MANUEL made no move. The Mexies watched him, but he gave no signal as Dogie propelled the knife-man out to the courtyard and to the archway, where he let him go with a well-timed kick on the seat of his pants. The man landed sprawling in the dust, just as a man on horseback arrived. His mount shied suddenly at the spraddling figure on all fours, looking like some strange animal.

The rider cursed the Mexie, swung his quirt, and when the Mexie yelped with the sting of the braided lash, he quirted him again and again, until the wretched man got to his feet and ran down the street, howling with pain and rage.

There was a lantern hanging in the arch. As the horseman swung to come in, Dogie recognized him. It was Sam Sowley of the S Bar S.

Dogie backed into the patio, under a vine clad *pergola*. He shinnied up a post, gripped one of the overhead trellis timbers, and hauled himself up, hidden by the vines. Sowley got off his horse.

Dogie's hunch was working out. Sowley was here to see Don Manuel. It had to do with the crossing and return of the steers. It would be a private talk. It might very well take place in the patio.

Sowley shouted for a *mozo*, and a boy came from the kitchen quarters. The owner of the S Bar S told him to find Don Manuel, and to tell him that Señor Ess was waiting to talk with him.

"See that nobody overhears you," Sowley warned the lad, and tossed

him a silver *peso*, which the *mozo* deftly caught.

Don Manuel came out almost instantly. Sowley emerged from the shadow of the vines. There was no formal greeting.

"Anybody else in the patio?" asked Don Manuel.

"Nobody. Empty when I come in," answered Sowley. "Why?"

"There was a gringo, a youngster with the face of a *ternero*. I found him watching when the steers went across the river. I think he may be a spy."

Sowley laughed. "You Mexies are always thinkin' of spies," he said jeeringly. "A spy for who? The Government? A youngster with a face like a calf? If you thought him dangerous, why not attend to him yourself?"

Don Manuel said no more. He hoped that Dogie had taken a hint from the hustling in the *Posada*, and had decided after all that El Hato was unhealthy. He did not want to discuss his own failures.

"It's all over but the shootin'," Sowley went on. "I got hold of the agent. We get the cars day after termorrer. We'll drive in thet mornin'. State Inspector'll be on hand. There'll be no hitch. What I want to know is, when do I git my money? I don't want to wait as long as I did last time."

"It takes time," said Don Manuel. "There has to be delivery in Detroit, when payment will be made. As soon as it reaches me, my friend, you get your share."

"Hurry it erlong. I need it. I *got* to hev' four thousan' *pesos* by the fifteenth, to close a deal."

Four thousand dollars—and that only a share! The most those forty primes would fetch would be twenty-five hundred, on a high market. Dogie's hunch grew stronger.

"It should be here by then, my friend," said Don Manuel smoothly. "You will come in and drink with me? There is champagne or good brandy that has paid no duty."

"Some other time," replied Sowley. "I'll see you at Cold Spring Siding, day after termorrer, in the forenoon."

He got into his saddle and rode away. Don Manuel stood looking after him, twirling his snaky mustache. Suddenly he whirled and inspected the patio.

But he did not look on top of the *pergola*. Dogie waited a minute or so after Don Manuel had gone inside before he slid down the post, led his horse through the arch, swung to the saddle, and rode east, out of the village, out of the gap between the cliffs, into the brushlands.

THERE was nothing at Cold Spring Siding but double spur-tracks beside the right of way, a water tank, and shipping corrals and chutes. It was a favorite stop for engineers to take advantage of the pure water.

The nearest railroad depot was Sage City, a small town that catered both to cattlemen and to prospectors from the recently developed gold mines in the foothills.

Early that morning, a switch engine had brought two boxcars to the siding. In the middle afternoon, a freight would stop, hook on the two loaded cars, and take the S Bar S steers on their way.

The herd arrived at the corrals soon after eight o'clock. Sowley and three of his riders were with them. They split the forty head into four corrals, then sat on the teeter top-boards, waiting for the State Inspector to pass them, waiting also for Don Manuel.

The engineer and fireman of the switchhog took their puffer back to Sage City.

The punchers rolled cigarettes. They watched the steers, that were a little uneasy, kept them from milling. Two of them, one in each car, were to go with the stock.

It was already hot. Foothills shimmied in the haze. *Cicadas* whirred. Sowley smoked a cigar. He was a big man, with a paunch and shrewd, light grey eyes that were set close together above the bridge of his bulbous nose.

Dust rose. Two riders came rac-

ing up—the inspector and Don Manuel. The State official did not seem too pleased with his company, but their trails had joined a few miles back, Don Manuel coming in from El Hato.

The inspector would get a fee from this job, and he was very anxious to get through with it. He had passed S Bar S stock before. This was a likely looking lot. They should give him no trouble.

Sowley chewed off the wet end of his cigar. There was more dust, coming out from Sage City, heading for the siding. His eyebrows came close together. He saw no cause for worry, but he wondered who the riders could be, why they came this way?

There were three of them. A star glittered on the breast of one of them, Chub Hendon, county sheriff, stocky, dependable. A hard man to put off a trail.

Sowley did not know the second of the three. He was not a puncher, Sowley fancied, though he rode well enough. He did not wear chaps. Don Manuel knew the third. It was the calf-faced watcher of the bluffs. Sowley knew him too.

Sowley nodded. An anxious look came into his eyes. Hendon greeted him.

"Shippin' early, ain't you, Sowley? Likely lot you got there."

Dogie was looking at the steers. They had not been dehorned for their train trip. He had not expected them to be. If they had been, he would have ridden away, ashamed of himself and his hunch.

"Got to sell when you kin, these days," said Sowley. "We all need money. You folks headed for here?"

"Thet was the general idee," said the sheriff easily. "Meet Dean, Sowley."

Sowley gave Dean a dirty look. "I've met him," he said shortly. "He was out to my spread."

"Meet Robinson," the sheriff continued. "Mr. Robinson, he's workin' fer the Government. Federal."

It seemed as if the *cicadas* had stopped their incessant chirping. It seemed for a while as if the men had all stopped breathing, and were watching each other. Sowley shifted in his saddle, and it creaked.

He nodded at the Federal man. "Glad to meet you," he said, through dry lips.

"Dean was tellin' us quite a yarn as we come erlong," said the sheriff. "Seems he's a sort of a private range detective. I've seen his credentials. He was sort of worried when he saw your steers — forty of 'em—bein' driven ercross the Rio Grande to Mexico, an' comin' back agin.

"He got a notion they might be these same forty you're aimin' to ship. He 'lows there's one steer with a big white dumb-bell blaze on its offside—must be the one in the second corral, Sowley."

"I don't see why he should worry. They ain't *his* steers," replied Sowley, and he talked as if he had too big a chaw of plug in his mouth. "Don't look to me like it was any of *his* bis'ness."

"Mebbe not. Seems he was shot at once, an' sort of crowded at the *Posada* in El Hato. He kind of linked things up. Got me interested. Likewise Mr. Robinson. How erbout it, Dean?"

"I'll tell you," said Dean. "I'm sort of steppin' outside my reg'lar range, mebbe. I hed a notion thet gent"—he nodded at Don Manuel—"who met me on the bluff, figgered me fer a revenue agent. Now, I don't claim to hold with smugglin'.

"I wouldn't figger it my affair to interfere with *contrabranda*, like likker, silks an' such. Drugs is different. 'Specially when they're dope. To me, a man who'd run dope is worse'n a hydrophoby skunk. Thet's why I got in touch with the sheriff, an' him with Mr. Robinson."

"What's thet to do with me?" asked Sowley, and still his voice was not clear. Don Manuel made his horse prance. It sidled off and Dogie edged it back.

"IT'S jest a fool notion of mine, mebbe," said Dogie, "but I noticed the dehornin' machine at your spread, Sowley. Don't see why you'd

use it except when you shipped, unless it was one reason. I heard you an' Don Manuel here talkin', at the *Posada*. My guess may be all wrong. It's up to Robinson here, actin' fer Uncle Sam."

Robinson took a small gold badge from his pocket and showed it to Sowley, also to Don Manuel. He let the punchers see it.

"Go ahead, Dean," he said. "I know your reputation, or I wouldn't be here. Turn your hole card."

"Those steers hev' been dehorned," said Dogie. "The horns they're wearin' now are dummies, made out of some composition. You can't see where they're cemented on to the stubs, 'count of them bein' Herefords, with woolly foreheads. I reckon they're glued more solid now than when they crossed the river—*an' got the dope packed inside of 'em.*"

Don Manuel swore. He set his sharp, roweled spurs deep into the flanks of his horse, making it rear as he swung it on its hind legs.

Dogie caught the bridle, brought the horse to the ground with his left hand.

He saw Don Manuel's hand flash to his gun-belt, and he grinned as his own hand moved faster. His bullet tore the knuckles off Don Manuel's fist. Blood spurted. The anguish of broken bone made the *caballero* groan, sway in his saddle.

Don Manuel had stayed mounted. Sowley was afoot. Two guns barked sharply. Dogie felt the searing sting of lead along his side. He shifted the arc of his smoking pistol and saw Sowley reeling back against the corral. The sheriff faced him. Sowley dropped his gun and grabbed his shoulder with a hand that was suddenly dyed with crimson.

"You're jest makin' things worse fer yourse'f, if they're as Dean claims," said the sheriff. "Boys," he called to the punchers, "you're buckin' the U.S.A. We ain't proved nothin' definite, *yet*, 'cept fer these two jaspers startin' to smoke-up. But now we'll hev' a look-see at them horns. I'm swearin' you in as deputies to assist me. Might help you later."

Dogie grinned at Don Manuel.

"Better let me fix thet hand," he said. "I'm holdin' no grudge. The courts'll attend to thet. You were right, at thet. This sure is one unhealthy country—fer you an' Sowley."

The sheriff came toward them, a horn of celluloid composition in his hand.

"You were right, Dean," he said. "I might hev' knowed it."

TENDERFOOT TRAIL

(Concluded from page 98)

Then he and his foreman rode until they were lost in a slow-moving dust cloud that traveled off toward the Key home spread—

Feliz suddenly emerged from the willows. He was holding up a .30-30 cartridge.

For the first time since his arrival, Terry saw him grinning.

"Well, l o v e a duck!" blurted Woody. "If Old Man Locke had o' knowed *that!* His last bullet— Hi, Townley, what yuh openin' that gate for now?"

Terry's blood was racing with the thrill of his complete victory, and the grateful knowledge that Feliz was loyal.

"We're heading f o r town," he said.

"For a deed tuh Coyote Springs, I reckon," Woody surmised.

"And for bullets and beans!" Terry laughed.

Next Month: COW CRAZY, *a Novelette of Hard-Ridin'; Hard-Fightin' Hombres by* LARRY A. HARRIS

Christmas Charley

They rode toward his plunging horse—firing

Lightnin' Draw Gulch Shore Needed a Hombre Who Could Raise a White Beard—But Not When He Raised a Thirst

By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

Author of "Bill the Conqueror," "The Man from Texas," etc.

GLANCING up, Rusty Daggett's heavy jaw sagged and his wide, humorous mouth popped open. Before he had had time to think, both his .45s were in his hands. They were leveled at a white-bearded rider who forked a strawberry roan. Rusty's taut fingers relaxed on the triggers of his guns, and he holstered them with a snort of disgust.

"Waugh!" he snapped. "Ole Christmas Charley's goin' to get hisself mistook for Silent Sam if he ain't keerful."

Rusty's swiftly drawn guns had taken Pop Pinsley by surprise. Now he mopped his brown parchment face. A lean, dried-up little man who did not reach to Rusty's shoulder, he steered a brown stream at the deep dust of Lightnin' Draw Gulch's main street.

"It's plumb disgraceful," the old man piped. "And the day before Christmas, too!"

Rusty knew what Pop meant. Old Charley was "high" again. Two bottles thrust through the white-bearded rider's sagging belt proved that. The scraggly roan had come into town unguided. Christmas Charley's head was nodding on his chest. He snored peacefully.

Charley had been branded "Christmas Charley" some twenty years before, the year Rusty Daggett was born. The birth of a male son to the Daggetts made history in Lightnin' Draw Gulch. It was a sign the maverick town was becoming respectable. So the boys held a meeting in the Climax Bar one Christmas day and Charley was solemnly appointed St. Nick. He had the only white beard in town; and the job of donning a red suit and distributing presents of .45s, chewing tobacco, and

spurs to the Daggett colt and his two proud parents appealed to Charley.

The boys called him "Christmas Charley," and the name stuck. For a few more colts and fillies came to Lightnin' Draw Gulch each year; and Charley cottoned to the idea of playing St. Nick for the kids. Charley lived up to the name, too, for a good many years. He was naturally kind-hearted and generous.

Five years before, however, Charley's son Windy, who was deputy, was killed by rustlers the week before Christmas. The boys all said that Charley wouldn't play St. Nick that year. But he did—and the day after Christmas, he got drunk for the first time in his life. After that, he reversed the procedure. Christmas always made him think of Windy, and old Charley would get roaring drunk. The boys would get him sobered up for the Christmas entertainment; but there was a movement on foot to displace old Charley with Gus Darnley, the banker, who held the mortgage on Charley's little ranch. Darnley's beard was white enough and long enough; but in no other way did he fit the part.

Knowing all this, Rusty realized it would break Christmas Charley's heart if they wouldn't let him play St. Nick. Darnley wanted that job, too! It might soften feelings toward him if the townsfolk saw him giving presents he didn't pay for to the kids.

IT was time, Rusty figured, to put a scare into Christmas Charley before Darnley got that coveted job. Pop Pinsley would gladly have headed a recall movement. For fifteen years he had snorted and sputtered every time anyone reminded him of how Christmas Charley had got the better of him on a horse trade.

Rusty pushed his sombrero back on his tousled red head, thinking. Then his freckled face relaxed in a broad grin. Leaving Pop Pinsley abruptly, he pushed through the swinging doors of the Climax Bar.

"Hombres," he yelled, "all o' yuh fire-eaters gather 'round. I got an idee for reformin' ole Christmas Charley."

The boys gathered around, and Rusty outlined his plan. Grins spread around the group. Christmas Charley was popular, and no one wanted to see him lose the sole honor remaining to him.

"Shore," Lefty Baxter chuckled. "We're with yuh, Rusty. We'll throw such a scare into that ole sinner that he won't never tech likker agin with a ten-foot pole."

The Climax Bar emptied into the dusty street. A crowd gathered around old Christmas Charley. But he continued snoring, unconscious of the circle of grinning men.

Rusty had borrowed some things at the blacksmith shop. Lefty helped him to use them where they'd do the most good. They tied old Charley's high-heeled boots securely in the stirrups. Other thongs they slipped through the back of Charley's cartridge belt, tying them to the thongs at the back of the saddle which served to tie on a bedding roll.

"Come on, yuh ding-busted outlaws," Rusty whispered.

The men he had previously selected for the rôles climbed to the hurricane decks of their cayuses, and followed Rusty as he rode slowly to the edge of town. Turning, he surveyed the street. It was deserted, save for Christmas Charley's chestnut roan. It stood in the center of the street, head down dejectedly, half-heartedly flicking away flies with its tail.

"Wahoo!" Rusty yelled, touching his cayuse's flanks with spurs.

Down the street the waddies rode, raising a cloud of dust. Rusty fired into the air, yipping as he raced along. Behind him, a score of buckaroos banged away and yelled.

From behind posts along the street, other guns blazed. The men supposed to repel the attack were making it convincing! Silent Sam, the white-bearded outlaw, could have thrown the town into no greater state of pandemonium if he had suddenly decided to favor Lightnin' Draw Gulch with one of his lone-man raids.

The chestnut roan plunged in

fright, jerking Christmas Charley's head violently. His china blue eyes popped open, and grew enormous as he saw a band of men with scarfs covering the lower portion of their faces.

They rode toward his plunging horse, firing above the old sinner's head.

Charley was no coward, but he hadn't the faintest idea of standing there in the middle of the street, target for the bullets of twenty outlaws. He made a movement that would have landed him on his feet running. But he got his right foot part way over the roan's back—*and there he stuck!* Wrenching desperately, he tried to raise his body in the saddle. But the thongs held fast, and he couldn't budge.

Bullets whistled and whined over his head. Desperately, Christmas Charley grabbed for his hardware.

Rusty and Lefty had taken care of that! Thongs had been twined around the butt of the gun in such a way that the old man couldn't free the weapon from the holster to which it had been fastened. But in his excitement, Christmas Charley didn't know that.

Tears rolled down cheeks as red and round as apples. He ceased struggling. Pulling the two bottles out of his cartridge belt, he stared at them with brimming eyes, and then hurled them into the street.

"It's that tarantula juice that Pete sells in the Climax," he cried in a choked voice. "It's ate out my nerves. Help me, boys. I'm so plumb weak I cain't even h'ist my six-gun."

But everyone conspicuously ignored Christmas Charley. Down the street tore the shooting cowboys. Flashes played from behind posts, windows and doors.

"Help me, yuh idjits!" begged Christmas Charley. "Cain't yuh see I got paralysis from the waist down?"

But the shooting cowboys bore down on the white-bearded old horseman. They surrounded him, fairly parting his hair with their bullets. And Lefty, in a Siwash spirit of fun, drew to a sharp halt beside Christmas Charley, poked his gun under Charley's chin, and fired.

Suddenly there was a spurt of flame. Christmas Charley screamed. His beard was on fire!

Rusty flung himself off his cayuse, racing toward the watering trough. Swinging a pail, he filled it with water in one swift movement, and zig-zagged through the rearing horses. He dashed the water on the flaming beard.

The fire was out, and the old man was only slightly singed. But his gnarled old hands trembled as he fingered the grizzled stubble that a few moments before had been a luxuriant white beard. It was a hushed, subdued group which watched him. Two tears ran down his ruddy cheeks. His firmly-compressed lips quivered.

"I reckon," he said in a voice not quite steady, "that yuh'll have to rope yoreselves another Santa Claus. The kids'd never stand fer me now, nohow."

Slowly, Christmas Charley turned his horse around, and rode out of town. The droop of his shoulders caused a lump to catch in Rusty's throat.

"Lefty, yuh ignerent cow-teaser!" he snapped. "Now see what yuh done by gettin' too danged playful."

Lefty slammed his sombrero in the dust and kicked it.

"I'd give a month's pay," he said, "if it'd buy back ole Christmas Charley's beard. Now we got to watch that skinflint Gus Darnley playin' Santa Claus afore the kids."

CHRISTMAS morning found Charley sitting on a cowhide chair on the porch of his shack. His heart was down in his boots. He had

eaten no dinner the night before, and he had had no breakfast. And, moreover, his stomach had constricted so tightly that he didn't at all miss his usual rations of bacon and beans.

Charley was crushed—utterly and completely. He had never known a man could feel so low. He was even too indifferent to raise his eyes when he heard the clatter of shod hoofs on the hard-baked ground. But when the horseman stopped beside the steps, Charley glanced up to see who the visitor might be.

He was a stranger, not many years younger than Christmas Charley. His eyes were frosted blue in color. His mouth was a straight slash in a hard face. Below the cruel slash of a mouth was the object which held Charley's china-blue eyes with a startled fascination. A long, white beard!

ANY man in Lightnin' Draw Gulch would have recognized the man. His picture was on posted notices in the sheriff's office and on the walls of the Climax Bar. But Charley had never seen those notices. He seldom got to town.

"Get some grub, pronto!" rasped the stranger. "I'm hungry!"

Christmas Charley scarcely heard. The white beard still gripped his attention.

With such a beard, he would hold the spotlight again at the Christmas entertainment to be held in town in just two hours.

Vain regret!

Abruptly, the stranger whipped out a silver-mounted gun. "Get movin', yuh singed polecat!"

Reference to his lost glory exploded something in Christmas Charley's brain. It drove in the knife of despair and twisted it. Charley bounded to his feet like a bronc out of the chute. His gnarled hand flew toward his gun.

"Yuh ornery, back-bitin' coyote!" he shrilled. "I'll lairn ye—"

The stranger's gun blazed. A shot, purposely high, aimed for the head, buzzed past Christmas Charley's left ear. The second shot, a split-second later, would have bored through his head.

Two days before, however, the stranger's horse had been shot under him.

The horse which he now rode, and which he'd taken in a hurried getaway, was not gun-broken. At the first shot, it plunged in fright. And that plunge saved Christmas Charley's life.

The second bullet thudded into the wall of the shack.

Anger at those probing words had dropped years from Christmas Charley's shoulders. A slow eye would have sworn that the hitch of Charley's knee threw the gun out of its

holster and into his blurring hand. The roar of his .45 drowned out the sound of the stranger's second shot.

And then, strangely enough, the silver-mounted gun slipped from the horseman's hand. He slid sideward in his saddle, and the horse's next plunge threw him off. He lay on the ground, unmoving.

Now that it was all over, Christmas Charley was trembling. His voice was shaky as he spoke to the horse. His knees were shaky, too, as he walked to the side of the fallen man. A gash in his head explained why he didn't move.

"What a danged handsome beard," he said in an awed voice.

An hour later, Christmas Charley rushed into the Climax Bar, which was being decorated by the boys for the entertainment. His face was bright with excitement as he caught Rusty's arm.

"Get the barber and meet me down at his shop, *muy pronto!*" he shrilled. "I reckon I'll be a-playin' St. Nick for them young uns, after all."

Rusty found the barber, and sent him along.

And then, when he had finished decorating the hall, he went along with Lefty to learn the cause of Christmas Charley's excitement.

A man was tied in the barber chair, and his slitted eyes were blazing. The barber's face was white. And Christmas Charley was waving his .45 directly under the barber's nose.

"I don't give a dang who this hombre is," Charley was yelling. "Cut off his beard, I tell yuh! I'm goin' to have his beard if I have to glue it on. Like as not Darnley'll foreclose my mortgage, but it'll be wuth it."

RUSTY took another look at the man tied in the barber's chair, and then his jaw dropped.

"Awk!" he gasped; and ran toward the sheriff's office.

When the sheriff returned with Rusty, the barber was in the process of gluing the stranger's shorn beard to Christmas Charley's chin. It bore only a faint pretense to a real beard; but it would serve. Christmas Charley would get his wish; once more he'd be St. Nick for the youngsters of Lightnin' Draw Gulch.

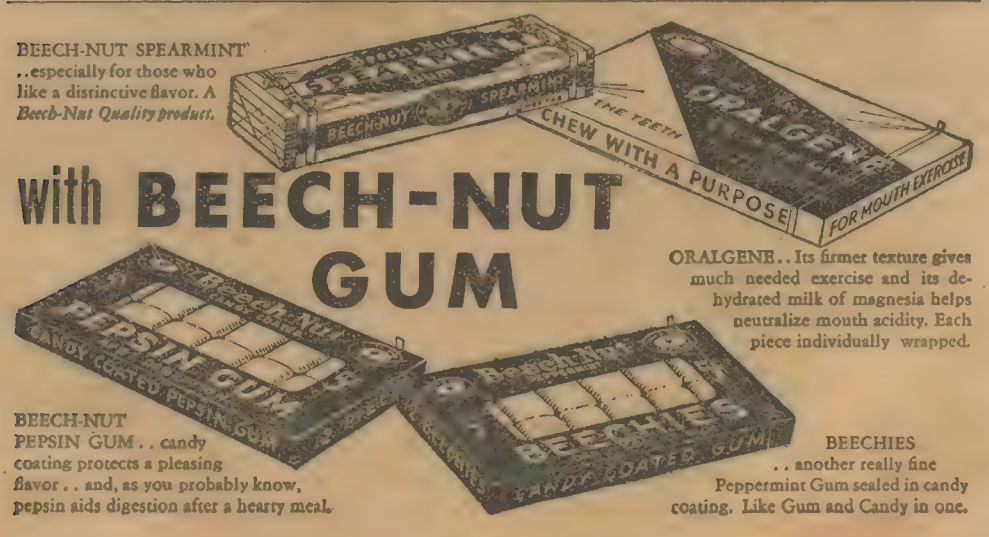
The sheriff took one look at Charley's prisoner, and then he turned to Charley.

"Yuh ding-busted ole buckaroo," he exclaimed in admiration. "Don't yuh know they's a thousand dollars reward for bringin' in this hombre, dead or alive?"

Christmas Charley's china-blue eyes popped open wide.

"A thous—why, that's more'n I owe Darnley at the bank. Who is that vallyble polecat I brung in?"

"Silent Sam," said the sheriff grimly.



Samaritan Sam's Two Hundred

Carlisle made a play for a gun—and died

This Whimsical Saddle Tramp Regards the Robbery of the San Paula Bank as a Personal Insult—and Wipes the Slate with Lead!

By EDWARD PARRISH WARE

Author of "Hell's Back Room," "Phantom of the Circus," etc.

SAMARITAN SAM JONES rode his blue-ticked roan into San Paula after two hundred dollars — and cantered right up against twenty thousand dollars' worth of trouble.

The trouble did not begin right on the minute of the tramp cowpuncher's arrival, but shortly thereafter. It was while he was gulping his fourth glass of beer in Charlie Hamp's saloon that he got the first hint of it.

"Yes," Charlie Hamp, back of the bar, was saying in a worried voice to a customer farther down, "I reckon it's a case of showdown betwixt Pete Clode and Art Dixon, this time fer sure. Pete allows that his gambling house, the Speckled Hen, is plumb ample to furnish the cowhands around here with plenty amusements. Art allows the same applies to his spread, the Galloping Goose—and it's up to Pete to *vamos*. Friends of each one of 'em has taken sides, and hell will pop jest any day—"

It began popping right then without further ado.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

Three stunning reports in rapid

succession ripped the afternoon quiet into tatters.

Samaritan ducked instinctively, and just as instinctively reached for his guns. Then he snapped erect again. It wasn't his fight. Thank heaven, here was one chunk of trouble which couldn't touch him from any angle!

Wham! Wham! Wham!

Three more reports, following instantly after the first, further advertised that trouble of a serious character was in the doing. Then Sam caught sight of a man across the street in front of the Galloping Goose gambling spread. The man was Art Dixon—and, a six-gun gripped in his right hand, he was reeling backward, clutching at the front of the building, trying to gain refuge in the doorway.

Dixon didn't reach the doorway. When almost there, he dropped—but, game as they came, he raised himself on an elbow, and blasted away at somebody up the street.

Sam, Charlie and the other customer had by then reached the doorway of the saloon. Sam peered out cautiously—and then swore softly in surprise.

FORTY feet from where Dixon lay on the walk, Pete Clode was sprawled. He, too, was making a last effort to sink lead in the body of his business rival. Evidently the two had met on the street, started blasting at each other, and each had found his target.

Then men began to appear on the street. Men who came along warily, hugging closely against the frame fronts of the buildings. Cowmen, business men, they were.

A moment, and the single street of San Paula was a bedlam of shouts, oaths and gunfire. Blue smoke formed a pall over the scene in no time, but not thickly enough to hide the half dozen sprawled figures already scattered here and there. Men staggered out into the street, firing their guns, trying to stay upright yet a little longer—only to go down in a moaning, writhing heap.

As suddenly as the bombardment had begun, it ceased. The smoke pall cleared.

Then, while a sheepish grin slowly spread Samaritan Sam's wide mouth, the dead men all got to their feet—laughing, shouting, cheering. As one unit, they raced for the Cocked Hat Hotel—and thundered inside.

Charlie Hamp was doubled up with merriment. The other customer looked shamed and disgusted. Sam merely grinned his sheepish grin.

Presently the reason for all the sham gunplay appeared from the hotel office. Rather, was dragged from it.

"A dang tenderfoot!" Sam grunted. "An' a dude one at that!"

In the forefront of the cheering and howling crowd, a tall young man, dyked out in an Easterner's conception of proper range apparel, was being hustled along the street. Laughing men slapped him on the back, poked him in the ribs, good-naturedly man-handled him.

The dude, red-faced and flustered, was laughing too. Like most tenderfoots, he was taking the hoax in good spirit. He was rushed through the doorway of Charlie Hamp's saloon—and the crowd followed on his heels.

"Charlie!" one of the crowd exploded. "We found him a-hidin' under th' bed in his hotel room—"

"He broke fer cover, Charlie, th' minnit he seen Art fall on his haunches—"

"An' when it comes to runnin'," Bill Blades shouted mirthfully, "he kin make any buck deer that ever hopped set up an' say uncle!"

"Introducin' Mister James Boddington Westbrooke, gents!" a grizzled cowman shouted, slapping the dude a resounding whack on the back. "Which Mister Westbrooke already knows, an' agrees in, th' drinks until midnight air on him! Come one, come all—it's time to likker up!"

The dude, beginning to catch the gala spirit himself, slammed a wad of greenbacks on the bar and cried:

"Everybody drinks on me, bartender—and when that pile is gone, there's more where it came from!"

An old hoax, new in some sections of the West, had been carried to a

successful conclusion. Samaritan Sam had heard of it before—but Sam hadn't been told there was a dude tenderfoot in town. Anyhow, Sam didn't want anything more to drink. He wanted his two hundred out of the bank. Wanted to invest in some badly needed clothes. A cowboy about to roll and ride to other parts, just has to have a sound outfit to start with. Sam's mind generally ran on a single track—and that track at the moment led right to the door of the bank.

AS Sam was sidling through the crowd in order to get out with as little attention to himself as possible, the dude turned to speak to a puncher back of him—and Sam got his first square look at him.

That look stopped the tall puncher in his tracks.

Then Samaritan was outside, leaning against the front of the building next door, fanning himself slowly with his disreputable hat.

"Mister James Boddington Westbrooke, is it?" he grunted to himself, while his grey eyes slitted. "Huh! If it ain't Mister Texas Pete Parker, lowdownest man-killer as ever prowled a range, then it's shorely Pete's double—an' I don't put no faith in doubles! Texas Pete Parker—an' posin' as a tenderfoot!"

That stuck in the tramp puncher's craw. What did it mean, anyhow? Surely something more than fun was wrapped up in it. Pete wasn't exactly noted for funning and playing pranks. His fame was based on something far different. On the number of notches on his guns!

Sam's purpose in coming to town, the dragging down of his two hundred, pushed the Texas Pete matter out of his mind. He turned east and swung his lank, tattered person in the direction of the bank.

More excitement broke then. A man, shirt-sleeved, hatless, grey hair fanning in the breeze created by his own progress, came out of the bank and ran toward Sam. He was shouting something, but what it was the tall puncher could not make out. As the distance between them rapidly decreased, he got part of what the excited man was screeching.

"—to the last dollar! Not a cent overlooked! Blake Carlisle shot to death! Where's the sheriff? Somebody get the sheriff!"

The shouting man was Tom Marsten, cashier of the San Paula Bank. His cries had begun to attract a curious crowd. Sam, sensing disaster, wasn't a part of the crowd. He fairly raced inside the bank, down an aisle toward the president's desk—and nearly stumbled over a dead man on the floor.

The dead man was Blake Carlisle, assistant cashier of the bank.

Hemmingway, president of the bank, was back of his desk, drooped over, elbows on the blotter, face in his hands. He looked up when Sam stood before him.

"Cleaned out, Jones!" he babbled. "They cleaned us out! Shot poor Carlisle dead!"

"Yuh mean to say," Sam gulped, "that I can't git them two hundred bucks of mine outa th' bank?"

"I mean jest that!" Hemmingway moaned. "They didn't leave us two hundred cents. They got it all! Over twenty thousand in cash!"

"But—but, shorely, Hemmingway, yuh carried insurance?" Sam offered hopefully.

"Not a dime, Jones," Hemmingway told him. "We're a small outfit, as you know. Insurance of that sort comes high, out here where there's practically no police protection. We're cleaned out—"

"Yuh got some reserves, mebbe?"—grasping at a last straw.

"I tell you, Jones—we're done!" Hemmingway almost bleated. "Unless we can get the twenty thousand dollars back—we won't be able to pay out more than ten cents on the dollar. Maybe not even one cent!"

Samaritan's blood had been running cold. Now it began to boil. His two hundred shot to hell, winter in the offing, he in rags—

"Lissen, Hemmingway!" he suddenly snarled, face ugly, long white teeth revealed by the upcurve of his lip. "Mebbe yuh aim to set still an' take it on th' chin—but damned if *I*

do! I got two hundred bucks in th' fog—an' I aim to git it out! Them ornery sidewinders can't take that from me! How many was there?"

"Two. Tom and I had run out of the bank and up the street," he explained wearily, "to find out what all the shooting was about. We stayed a while to enjoy the sport—and when we came back, poor Carlisle lay dying on the floor. He lived to say a few words. Two punchers, both strangers to him, entered while the sham battle was raging, looted the bank and were about to leave. Carlisle made a play for a gun—and died. That's all I know—and probably ever will know!"

Having declared his intentions, Samaritan's fiendish expression disappeared, and his features became once more goodnaturedly normal. He even gave the president a sympathetic grin.

"I'M shore sorry, Hemmingway," he said. "An' I hope yuh gits yore twenty-thousand back!"

"Thanks, Jones. And I hope you recover your two hundred."

"I aim to," said Sam.

An excited mob was entering the bank when the tramp puncher left it. He was not interested in crowds, excited or calm, so paid it no mind. What Samaritan was wrestling with was this:

What was the shortest and quickest way in which to collect his two hundred dollars?

"Texas Pete Parker engineered th' thing," Sam assured himself, as he went thoughtfully toward Charlie Hamp's bar. "He's th' very identical hombre. Somebody here in town was bound to of worked with him. He had to have somebody rib up that sham battle to skeer hell outa th' supposed dude. Dang it, that was a good scheme," he went on with grudging admiration. "Everybody rushes toward th' scene of th' trouble, stays to laugh—an' two strange crooks stick up th' bank whilst they're doin' it. Yeah—a pretty dang smooth scheme. An' it stung me for two hundred bucks!"

(Continued on page 118)

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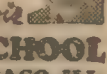

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(Continued from page 117)

It occurred to Sam that he should go to the sheriff and tip him off as to the real identity of the supposed dude. Tell him that Mister James Boddington Westbrooke was really Texas Pete Parker, wanted by at least half a dozen sheriffs in various states in the Southwest. But that didn't click—quite.

"No sheriff ever yet got back any stole money fer anybody," he reasoned. "Leastways, none I ever heard tell of. Reckon I'd better tackle this here job by my lonesome—then I know it ain't goin' to be all gummed up."

Sam found himself giving quite a bit of thought to the two bandits. They had been strangers to the assistant cashier. It followed, then, that they had not been long in that section of the country, and had steered clear of the town of San Paula.

"Texas Pete brought along them crooks," Sam finally decided. "Located a good hideout fer 'em—an' then pulled this job. Now," he went on, "it stands to reason that them two sidewinders didn't hang around town none today. They'd be remembered afterwards. So what?"

The answer came:

"Them hombres was camped out somewhere clost. Th' robbery, under cover of th' sham battle racket, was timed purty slick. Means th' camp them fellers had wasn't so very far away—yet purty well hid."

Sam began recalling the topography of the surrounding mesa. On the north there was level country, without so much as a deep depression. East the same. But the mesa to the south and west was serrated by coulees, dry arroyos, and the like.

He went to the hitch-rack where he had left Buster, the blue-ticked roan, mounted and rode off. For two hours he patiently rode the coulees and arroyos to the south of town. Then, just when he was beginning to think he'd drawn a blank, he came upon the remains of a recent campfire. It was in a rather deep coulee, and horses had been picketed there.

"Two broncs," Sam decided, after looking the place over.

Two men, he deduced later, had spent at least part of that day beside the small fire hidden in the coulee. They had cooked food, smoked many cigarettes. But Samaritan soon saw that he couldn't have any luck backtrailing them. A trail laid plainly enough in the direction of the town, but wind had blown sand over the one they had made when they came to the place.

He stood beside the dead ashes of the fire, thinking. Finally he decided that he'd have to look up Texas Pete and collect his two hundred dollars from that person.

"He'll mebbe have that much left—"

SAM found himself considering a twisted bit of paper which lay in the outer edge of the campfire ashes. Somebody had twisted it into a spill, and lighted one end of it. Nothing unusual in that, as it was often done on the range to save matches, but there seemed to be some sort of scribbling on the nub end of it.

Sam picked the twisted bit of paper up, untwisted it—and found that something had been written on the yellow paper. He managed to spell out the following:

Ride due south over San Carlos trail until you come to red sandstone boulder. Just one on this trail. Can't miss it. Turn west. Five miles to—

The fire had destroyed the rest.

Sam mounted and rode slowly back to San Paula. Before he reached the edge of the town, the full import of the words written on the charred bit of paper became clear to him.

"Pete scouted this job first," he decided. "Located a hideout, an' all that. Then he brought on his two stick-ups. He slipped 'em a scratch so's they'd know how to reach th' hideout—an' that's where them bullies is right now. Them—an' my two hundred!"

Samaritan ate a hearty supper, then went to Charlie Hamp's bar. A big crowd was still there—and the

dude was still buying the drinks. Sam rode rapidly south on the San Carlos trail.

The scent of wood smoke, long before dawn, tipped Sam off that human beings were somewhere on the floor of a boulder-choked gulch which he had been carefully scanning, and he promptly dismounted.

He wasted no time in planning elaborately, but staked Buster out half a quarter beyond the mouth of the gulch, then proceeded stealthily along its choked bottom.

Sam's plan was very simple indeed. He would crawl up as close to his quarry as he could get in safety, then charge. That the bandits would kill was a fact already established, so Sam meant to take no chances. When he attacked, he expected to do it through gun smoke.

At the end of a mile he caught sight of a light which came through the open doorway of a log shack set against the canyon's wall. It was almost completely hidden by many huge boulders, and Sam was soon worming his way on his stomach among those boulders. His progress was slow. Every few feet he would lie still and listen. All quiet. Once more he would snake forward.

Coming at last within fifteen feet of the open door, Samaritan stood upright on the lee side of a boulder. He listened. There came to his ears the hum of conversation. It never for a moment occurred to Sam that the occupants of the cabin could be anybody except the men he sought. He had ridden the trail according to the written directions, and had found his quarry. It remained only to take it.

Once again Sam acted in a simple and direct manner. With a six-gun in each hand, he sprinted for the doorway—and leaped through it.

"Elevate, damn yuh!" he snarled, his white teeth showing viciously.

The two startled punchers lying on blankets beside the sheet-iron stove, awake and waiting for the arrival of their leader, went into prompt and violent action. They were desperate men, and they acted accordingly.

The small hovel rocked with sound, smoke formed a haze over the room,

(Continued on page 120)

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(Continued from page 119)

with spurts of yellow flame lacing and slashing it from three different points of the compass.

An oath, a grunt, the sound of a body hitting the floor. More gunfire, more smoke haze, more yellow slashes in the misty curtain. Then abrupt silence.

When the smoke haze drifted out the doorway, Samaritan Sam was revealed crouching in a corner of the room. Blood from a bullet-gulched cheek dripped down his long neck. His eyes were slitted almost shut, and his white teeth glistened in the midst of a wolflike snarl.

Both of the tall puncher's six-guns were hot—but they had done deadly execution.

The two San Paula bandits would never rob another bank.

Assured at length that he was then the only living thing in the cabin, Sam got up and inspected the men he had shot it out with. Down in Texas, he had known them both—slightly, but well enough to recognize them then.

Shorty Hayes and Ned Bolton. They had been pals of Texas Pete Parker—and the San Paula job had not been their first, by a long, long ways.

The identity of the dead bandits made it certain that Sam had come upon the right place. It remained only to find the loot, and to pull out for San Paula.

"Pete'll be right badly put out," Sam grunted with a grim smile, "when he gits here an' finds this setup. But that'll be his hard luck."

Sam had no intention of remaining and capturing Texas Pete. Nothing so heroic as that. The taking of Pete was strictly a matter for the sheriff of the county, or some other law. Sam wanted only his two hundred dollars, and, as a favor to Hemmingway, he'd take the twenty grand along to him. Then he'd call it a day.

AN hour later, Samaritan realized fully how unfortunate it had been that he was forced to kill both Hayes and Bolton. An hour of fruitless search for the bank loot had brought him to that realization.

Nothing in the way of loot had been found. There was no trace of it in the cabin, under it, or anywhere within a radius of a hundred feet outside it.

The loot simply was not there!

Had the two bandits hidden it in some prearranged cache, some place distant from the hideaway?

Sam was reluctantly persuaded that they had done just that.

"An' both of 'em are dead!" he exclaimed regretfully. "Can't be made to talk. So I done had all my trouble fer nothin'!"

Maybe not, though. Sam got a thought that caused him to grin again. Texas Pete would drift in before long—and Pete would surely know of the prearranged hiding place, if indeed there were one. If he did not know, and Sam's luck with his guns had put the cache forever out of reach of both himself and Pete, then surely Pete would have as much as two hundred bucks on his person. So Sam settled down to wait.

Daylight was broadly streaking the eastern sky when Samaritan heard a horseman coming up the gulch. Peering through a hole in the front wall of the shack, he presently saw a lone rider come in among the boulders.

The rider was Texas Pete Parker.

Parker dismounted at the door, and hailed the cabin:

"Hey, inside! You fellers still snoozing?"

Sam gave a loud grunt, a yawn—and Pete, with a laugh, flung the door open and walked in.

"Howdy, Pete," Sam greeted him—a six-gun resting across his hip. "Been a long time since we met up with each other, ain't it?"

Pete, standing rigid just over the threshold of the doorway, looked the tattered puncher over, recognized him—then let his glance take in the condition of the room. He nodded understandingly.

"Yuh got 'em both, huh—Samaritan?" he commented. "Well," with a grin, "that leaves jest me an' you to split—"

"No split," Sam grunted. "I take all—or nothin'. Yuh want to argy about that, Pete—or would yuh prefer to go high, an' go on livin'?"

Parker squinted thoughtfully at the grim face of the man before him, then elevated both hands.

"Anybody but you, Sam—and I'd take a chance. As it is, come an' get 'em!"

Sam did. He disarmed the Texas desperado, tied his wrists behind him and hobbled his legs. Then he ordered him to sit.

"There ain't no loot here," he said quietly, sitting down also. "It's up to yuh, Pete, to talk. Where is it cached?"

"Hell!" Pete snapped back. "How would I know? Anyhow," craftily, "can yuh prove that I know anythin' at all about any loot?"

Sam gave that due consideration, then nodded slowly. He got up.

"Yuh got as much as two hundred bucks on yuh?" he asked.

"Hell, no! I spent up in town last night. I ain't got more than two bucks, all told."

"Too bad, then," Sam grunted. "That means I'll have to take yuh in an' peddle yuh to th' sheriff for that much jack."

And Samaritan, deaf to argument, got ready to leave. First, he gathered up all the firearms in the cabin, took them out back and cached

(Continued on page 126)

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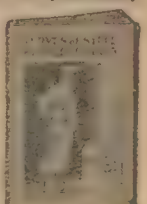

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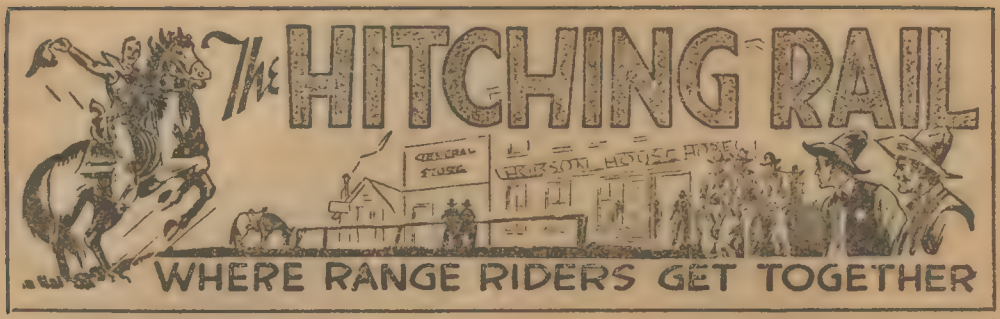

HELLO, folks! With yuh all ag'in an' danged glad tuh see yuh squattin' round about an' honin' fer more jabber, like we allers has when right time rolls around, eh? Always seems like most a year between months, me gittin' lonesome tuh grab yore hands an' see yuh smile as we says "Howdy"—an' sneaks th' boss's bottle from his lower drawer an' goes down back in th' alley an' wets our whistles first thing.

Keeps plumb good stuff, th' boss does, boys, an' don't cost me a red cent.

Last time Beaver Dick an' Baldy Wiggins, both from th' Square-Bar spread out in ol' Montany, comes rompin' in this offise tuh take a peek at Miss Blondie, what I'd writ 'em about, her bein' top looker in this yere vale o' civilization, we found th' boss knowed his cowboys an' had stocked up real aplenty. Fellas, was that a good time? I'm askin' yuh!

Beaver Dick, he writes me he ain't never felt human since goin' back West. Wants another invite, but nuthin' doin' till th' boss says th' word. Bailin' visitin' cowpokes outa New York calabooses costs real *dinero,* an' they's a limit.

Six-Gun Traffic Cop

After sixth drink time, old Beaver he insisted on standin' in th' middle o' Broadway an' 42nd Street an' directin' traffick with his six-gun; an' that jest didn't work. Cost 'im four days in jail an' me twenty bucks tuh git 'im out. Old Beaver, he most went on strike that time, madder'n hell at havin' his liberty curtailed; said th' Constitution made all men free an' equal.

An' talkin' o' strikes, fellas an' gals, that sorta brings up in my mind time some rannies out in Wyomin' tried a strike—first an' last one I ever heerd about among cowboys, but shore a fact, as I'll explain.

They Wanted Pay Pronto

We was all punchin' cows, them days, out on th' 71-Quarter Circle ranch, what's in th' Sweetwater Valley—vast open country what'd shore knock yore eyes out fer beauty an' fine grazin'. We'd rounded up 'bout six hundred cows an' was shovin' 'em towards th' home ranch fer shipment, about a dozen of us waddies. Custom then was tuh pay off after shippin', but few fellas—eight of 'em—wanted pay right then an' there, ag'in all custom.

Boss, he listened, then told 'em th' ranch was stickin' by its rules, an'd pay after shippin' day.

"We'll strike!" announces one husky hombre what thought him an' th' other seven could run a blazer on our boss. But old John Clay wasn't no man's heel-dawg an' he eyed them hombres cold an' steady.

"Strike!" he says, grim like. "An' be damned!"

"Git Ridin'"

Them eight fellas busted away, leavin' th' herd fer jest what was left o' us tuh trail-drive home; 'crost mean country what needed ev'ry man of us. Them low-down skunks jest laffed. Reachin' th' home ranch, they stands 'round, waitin', cussin' mean, fingerin' their guns, tryin' tuh be tough, makin' threats 'bout gun-play, hoss-whippin' an' all that sorta jabber. When th' boss an' us arrives there with th' herd, we was all feelin' sore at them fellas, havin' had tuh do all their work an' our own. Th' boss, he pays each o' them fellas off pronto then an' points to'ards town.

"Now git ridin' you hombres, an' don't never come back. Th' strike's all your'n, but not on this yere outfit. Th' broncs yuh been ridin' all belongs tuh th' ranch, but yore saddle outfits is your'n, tuh do what yuh likes with."

But They Come Back

He eyed them rannies mean an' 'lowed his hands tuh rest on his gun-butts. His decision left them waddies with a twenty-mile walk through hot sand ahaid of 'em, tuh reach town. Looked like a heap o' gun-play was gonna start right then an' there, but old John Clay's eyes didn't do no soft-enin' an' them fellas, cussin' mean, started, saddle oufits over their backs.

But they come back to'ards evenin', hot, footsore an' meaner'n before, throwed down their saddle outfits an' talked rough, each claimin' he'd swipe a hoss whether or no. Charlie Studder an' me, we drove away th' saddle stock intuh th' hills an' Charlie held th' hosses there, outa reach. I rides back, tuh find them howlin' would-be badmen pawin' th' ground an' makin' threats o' raisin' hell.

Th' boss, he stayed inside his shack, disgusted, but with his Winchester clost; an' ef ever a man could make a Winchester sing, old John Clay could. An' whenever old John remained quiet, thataway, folks had better look out. Lead-poppin' time was about at hand.

Evenin' come 'round with them fellas still chawin' th' rag as tuh what they'd do tuh all of us an' to th' boss in particular. We other waddies jest sat tight, not sayin' a word. Ef gun-play was comin', we'd let 'em open th' ball. Then big Tyke Waller, our foreman, dragged his bunk an' blankits over in front o' th' boss's door an' stroked his gun-butts, eyein' them strikers steady.

"Play Yore Hand"

"Well, boys," he said to 'em as they stood scowlin' an' spittin' at mesquite an' sage, "ef any of yuh aims callin' th' boss's hand, yuh'll have tuh crawl me first, afore yuh gits inside at 'im, an' after yuh *does* git in there, yuh'll find his Winchester's right speedy an' willin'. Strikes on this yere spread ain't none popular, but—play any hand yuh likes."

Rest of us scattered 'round handy, fingerin' our guns an' watchin' fer th' break tuh bust out, all stickin' by th' boss, who was shore a top-hander tuh his riders. Them mean guys got together, whisperin', 'bout a hunderd yards away in th' dark, an' looked like they'd open fire any minit. Got th'

(Continued on page 124)

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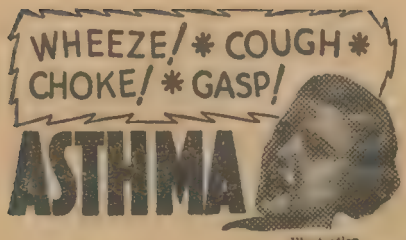

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(Continued from page 123)

rest of us sorta hostile an' we was losin' sleep what we needed. So we formed a sorta vigilante committee of our own an' covers them hombres with out .45s an' advises 'em tuh take their walk pronto an' peaceful.

It Busted Plumb to Pieces

But then come a surprise, plumb onexpected. Suthin' shot through th' air an' lit kerplunk right among them highbinders, an' that suthin' no man didn't have tuh ask what is. A skunk has a way o' tellin' of his presence, an' them hombres got all what was comin' to 'em. An' how come?

Seems Charlie Studder'd roped th' durned skunk out near th' hosses he was holdin' in th' hills, had slipped back tuh th' ranch an' throwed that loud-smellin' little animile from th' end o' his lariat. That strike busted plumb tuh pieces right then an' there.

Yowls, an' then plunges fer th' waterin' troughs, an' into that water them strikers went head first, kicking, splashing, cryin' fer our help. But th' roar o' laughter what rose up from everybody broke that mean strikin' idee plumb outa everybody's haid, an' when all was over an' them eight standin' naked as th' day they was borned, beggin' fer our old clothes an' minus their weapons, promisin' anything ef we'd help 'em outa their fix, th' boss come strollin' up, Winchester 'crost his arm, an' asks 'em ef they're ready tuh git back tuh work an' says he'll allow 'em five minutes tuh put on their smelly clothes an' git tuh nightherdin' our cows.

Even strikin' cowpokes knows when they're in th' wrong ag'in a good boss, so them hombres put on them clothes, saddled up an' rid to th' herd like a bunch o' Sunday-school kids. But they was laffin' humanlike, an' we knowed our strike was all over—an' no man daid. But ev'ry laff o' that sort has a kick-back, like an old gun what's rusty, an' th' kick-back hit th' rest of us pronto. That durned skunk got inside our bunkhouse — an' th' rest of us spent th' night yowlin' an' scrubbin', sorta evenin' things up. After that night, I never seen a better bunch o' saddle-pounders than them eight.

Th' Letter Box

An' now fer some o' our letter-writin' pals. Luke Wright o' Tacoma—shore far away from our cow country, Luke, aincha?—asks where tuh buy good polo ponies. Luke, write tuh th' Chamber o' Commerce, San Antonio. Yuh've shore come tuh th' right place, askin' us back here in th' offise.

Texas produces over ninety percent o' th' polo ponies these days, an' th' Chamber'll give yuh names of a dozen or more ranches what breeds an' trains 'em. Lotta

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ranches now has their cowboys playin' polo, fer market purposes, an's shippin' a heap o' fine hosses east fer that purpose. Tuh name jest one big ranch where yuh kin git yore info, write to th' Brite Ranch, Marfa, Texas, which ain't none better'n th' Brite.

Big Foot Wallace

Lester Scott o' Richmond, Virginia, comes next. Writes a fine letter. Les, yuh does, an' yore picture's a humdinger, all dressed up in them ridin' clothes like a huntin' rider 'crost country—an' with yore gal, 'bout as sweet a sight as my old orbs ever lamped. Better bring 'er up yere soon an' let us git better acquainted. Boss'll treat yuh fine, Miss Blondie'll show yuh New York, an' I'll take yore gal fer a spin in th' boss's new Cadillac.

Yuh asks to know suthin' about Big Foot Wallace, Les. Big Foot was a famous frontiersman, especially down in th' Big Bend country in southern Texas, an Injun fighter with a high record fer personal bravery and six-gun expert. He rode as mail carrier 'crost th' Southwest, his first route bein' from San Antonio tuh El Paso—six hunderd miles—what was then hostile Injun country. He had lotsa fights with redskins, then was captured by 'em an' adopted by a Comanche chief an' made a brother o' th' chief's young son Black Wolf. This son helped Big Foot, later, tuh escape back tuh th' whites.

Later, Big Foot was captured by th' Mexicans an' taken down tuh Mexico City, an' little while later, at th' famous drawin' o' white an' black beans at Rancho Salado, he was fortunate enough tuh draw a white bean an' thus git set free. Some says he was called Big Foot 'cause he chased th' Comanche chief, Big Foot, so long an' so hard; others says it was 'cause his hoofs was actually double size. Have tuh tell yuh more another time, son. Space's limited.

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An' now, friends, how 'bout our SWAP COUNTER? Air yuh usin' it like yuh'd oughta? Git in it an' let us know how yuh comes along. Great fun, an' valuable swaps bein' made. An' ef yuh ain't sent in your application fer membership in our RANGE RIDERS' CLUB, fill out th' coupon on page 123 and mail it in tuh us *muy* pronto, with self-addressed an' stamped return envelope an' we'll shoot yuh yore membership card fast. Then yuh'll be sittin' yore kak proper an' with pals—fellas an' gals what rides.

Watch out fer our next month's number, too, ev'body. It's gonna burn yuh up, all top-hand stories by th' best pen-slingers they is. There'll be a novel, THE ONE-SHOT KID by T. W. Ford, an' KILLER

(Concluded on page 126)

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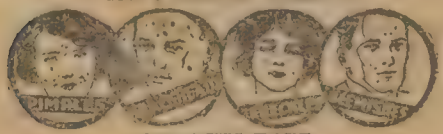

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AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

(Concluded from page 125)

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Well, be seein' yuh, everybody! Shore'll be yere when yuh all comes lopin' up tuh our HITCHIN' RAIL next time.

Buck Benson

SAMARITAN SAM'S TWO HUNDRED

(Continued from page 121)

them. Then he placed the dead men on their blankets and covered them up. Finally he rode the outlaw's horse down the canyon and got his own. When he stepped into the cabin again, he tapped the butt of the one gun he then wore, and said:

"Pete, there ain't now but one gun betwixt us—an' I'm wearin' it. I hate to herd a feller as far as I've got to herd yuh, an' him all tied up like yuh are. I aim to cut yuh loose so you kin make a better ride of it. Yuh'll ride not more'n twenty feet ahead of me—an' if yuh make one fool move, I'll shoot yuh like I would a jackrabbit. Come on. Let's ride."

Pete walked out ahead of Sam, after his bonds had been slashed, and mounted his horse. He was wary, watchful, his beady eyes glittering.

"Yuh never will prove nuthin' on me," he commented, as Sam started to mount his roan. "No loot, so no way to connect me with anybody. Yuh'll jest get yourself in trouble—trying to explain why yuh hauled off and murdered them two pore cowpokes inside. Think it over, Sam, before it's too late."

"To hell with yuh!" Sam snapped, and set foot in stirrup.

The roan, for some reason or other, was restive. As Sam started to mount, the animal swerved toward

Funnier COLLEGE HUMOR *15c Everywhere*

the bronc on which the outlaw sat. Like a snake striking, Texas Pete reached for Sam's holster, snatched out his six-gun—

"Yore turn now, yuh damned range tramp!" he snarled through chuckles and grunts of glee. "Raise 'em high, damn yore eyes!"

Sam, the picture of surprise and mortification, turned slowly—his hands in the air.

"I oughta kept yuh tied—" he began regretfully.

"But yuh didn't!" Pete reminded him, swinging down to the ground. He examined the Colt quickly, nodded satisfiedly when he saw that it was fully loaded. Then: "Back up, tramp!" he snarled. "Yuh're tricky, and I ain't overlooking any bets!"

A search revealed that Samaritan Sam had no other weapon on him. The gun the outlaw held was the only one.

"Now, yuh pore sap," Pete ordered, "step around back of the shack, and head th' way I tell yuh to!"

AT a distance of a quarter mile south of the cabin, in a brushy canyon floored with loose rock, Texas Pete ordered a halt.

"That boulder just ahead of yuh," he said, chuckling with pleasure. "Push on it, Samaritan. Push hard—an' then look what yuh've found!"

Sam pushed. The boulder rolled aside, exposing a shallow hole where it had stood. A stuffed grain sack nearly filled the hole.

"Pick up that sack!" Pete snarled. "It's got twenty grand or better in it—and now it's all mine! Pick it up, and toss it over here!"

There was a deadly glint in the bandit's eyes. Sam saw it—and obeyed.

"Reckon, Pete," he offered, "yuh win this hand. But if ever we lock horns again—"

"We ain't!" Pete snapped. "I'm makin' a buzzard feast outa yore carcass, cowboy—and I hope it don't poison th' buzzards!"

Coolly, evilly, Texas Pete Parker

(Concluded on page 128)

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28x5.00-19	2.85	1.05
29x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
30x5.00-21	2.90	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.90	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
6.00-17	2.85	1.15
28x6.00-18	3.25	1.15
29x6.00-19	3.35	1.15
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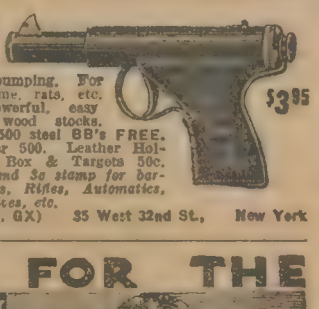

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(Concluded from page 127)

sighted along the barrel of the six-gun—then squeezed the trigger.

Click!

He squeezed the trigger again. *Click! Click! Click!*

He leaped backward, staring in astonishment at the weapon. That it was loaded he knew. Then why hadn't it fired?

Samaritan Sam was chuckling quietly.

"Shorty's gun," he remarked in explanation. "I tampered with th' firin' pin, Pete—afore I practically invited yuh to snatch it an' make buzzard-bait of my carcass. It won't shoot—an' it never will again. Too damned bad, ain't it?"

With a savage oath, Pete leaped for the grinning range tramp, the six-gun clubbed.

Sam, his only weapon a sizeable rock, let go. The rock took the outlaw in the pit of the stomach, knocking all the wind out of him. Sam's iron-hard fist did the rest of the business.

Fifteen minutes later, Sam, with the sack of loot tied back of his saddle, was herding a dejected bandit ahead of him toward San Paula.

"I played right into yore hands!" Pete exclaimed ruefully. "I know that—now! But how could yuh be sure that I had fixed a cache for that loot? That I'd know where it was? That's what I'd like to know!"

"I wasn't sure, none a-tall—but it was worth a chance," Sam obliged calmly.

"An' now yuh done joined hands with th' laws—an' aim to turn me up for a neck-bustin'—"

"Shut up!" Samaritan Sam broke in harshly. "I ain't joinin' hands with nobody. Yuh could of lifted them twenty thousand bucks an' got away with it, for all of me. I ain't paid to guard no banks, nor to catch no crooks. That's th' sheriff's job. Yuh could of done whut yuh done, an' I'd never of taken yore trail. But, cowboy—when yuh had th' gall to take my two hundred hard-earned dollars, that was gittin' jest a little too damned personal!"

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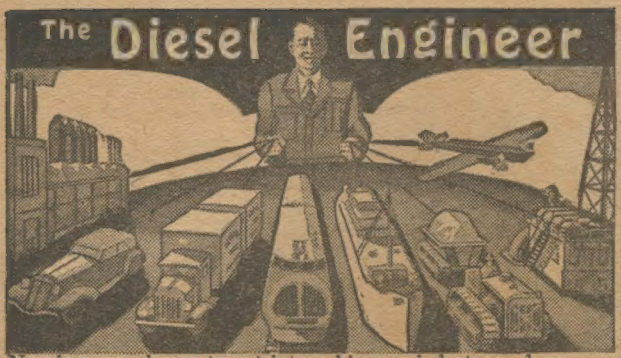

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